Will
Harvey
Kingdom of Queens

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For my Grandchildren

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Kingdom of Queens

By Will Harvey

1. Bolt of lightning

Hardly anyone noticed the old forgotten building, partly hidden by an overgrown hedge, as they walked, jogged or drove passed its austere, stone pillared entrance. Set back from the busy main road, very few people knew about the thirty-four elderly residents that lived within its bland brick walls. St. Michael would turn over in his grave if he knew that his namesake had been used inappropriately to identify this place as a nursing home of distinction.

In one of the small, stiflingly hot and altogether drab rooms, John Marutuk lived out most of his life. Occasionally, when he managed to slink past the over-protective staff, he wandered into town or sat beside the river in the park. However, it would never be long before he was spotted by a misguided do-gooder who informed the home of

an absconded *inmate*.

Apparently, he had dementia –memory like a sieve. It was for his own good to be kept out of harm's way in this soul-destroying place.

One day, it was a Wednesday, John Marutuk thought about his insufferable plight, about wasting his life in this hellhole and about the appalling food that was about to arrive – it was lunchtime. Suddenly, it was all too much to bear. An inner rage uncontrollably boiled up inside him. This was completely out of character as normally he was a temperate and tolerant man. Today was obviously an exception and it didn't help matters that his bed was on fire – to be more accurate, a roaring inferno.

Perhaps it was down to a faulty electric blanket or more likely, the bolt of lightning that, a few moments earlier, had spontaneously shot out of his finger-ends.

Naturally, he would blame it on the electric blanket.

2. Grandpa's coming to stay

Perhaps, not uncommonly, as with most tales involving Kings, castles, magic and dragons, it begins in current times – breakfast time to be precise.

Tegan and Caron, identical twin girls, were supposed to be sitting at the table, having their cereals. They were also supposed to be washed and dressed, supposed to be… a lot of things, but as usual, they weren't. They were behaving exactly like many other excitable six-year-old girls – and doing it noisily. As yet, it seemed, they hadn't learnt to talk, laugh, cry, move about or do anything quietly, which was inconvenient as the phone began to ring.

'A little quiet please, girls, while Mummy answers the phone,' said Daddy, (Larry Wheaton to everyone else) while eating burnt toast and reading a damp newspaper.

'How come I always have to answer the phone?' grumbled Mummy (Jennifer Wheaton to everyone else), breaking off from doing the million and one things that need to be done at this time of day.

'Because, sweetheart, you have such a nice telephone manner,' flattered Daddy.

Predictably, the children didn't quieten for long, if at all and Larry had found something far too interesting in the newspaper to repeat his request. Jennifer answered the phone cheerfully but as the seconds passed by, her cheeriness dissipated.

'Sorry, could you repeat that, the line's terrible?'

Despite the crackling phone line, she heard everything the first time, she just wanted it confirmed. There was no way around it, she had to tell Larry.

'My dad's coming to stay with us for a couple of months,' she said quietly and quickly, with trepidation.

'Really will have to have a word with the paperboy, the third time this week he's delivered a rain-soaked newspaper… Sorry love, what did you say? Sounded just like you said your dad's coming to stay for a

couple of months,' chuckled Larry, continuing to read the damp newspaper.

'I did.'

Suddenly, Jennifer had Larry's full attention – and also the children's.

'No, no, no way! Two months with a senile geriatric. He'll drive us all mad!'

'The home has had a bad fire. Eight weeks before they can move back in… And I object to you calling my dad a senile geriatric!'

'Mummy, he is!' said Tegan.

'See, even the children agree,' said Larry.

'You could at least show some concern… ask if Dad is OK!'

'Obviously, he's OK or he'd be in hospital, not about to grace us with his presence!' snapped Larry.

'Look, I'm not happy about it either, but… you'll just have to go mad!'

'Grandpa's coming to stay. Grandpa's coming to stay. Grandpa's coming to stay…' chanted the girls.

At least two of the family were happy with the news. It couldn't be avoided, Grandpa, Jennifer's father, was coming to stay for an awfully long time.

John Marutuk, mostly, if not always known as Grandpa, was not yet an age to be classed as a geriatric but it seems dementia can strike one down at any age. For five years he had been confined, imprisoned and incarcerated in St. Michaels. This happened to be most of the twin's life. Of course, it wasn't a prison by any stretch of the imagination, but that's what Grandpa always told the children when they visited him. Now he was being released, but certainly not for good behaviour! It wasn't expected that he would remember the family home, the names of the children, perhaps not even that Jennifer was married. However, he would always be Grandpa and father, with the same old quirky sense of humour.

'Grandpa!' yelled the children in unison as they ran towards him.

'Cathy… Tania!' cheered Grandpa as he hugged them tightly.

'Their names are Caron and Tegan, Dad,' said Jennifer calmly.

'That's what I said, diddle I? Well then, my little cherubs. How have Mummy and Daddy been looking after you? Plenty of sweets I hope and letting you stay up late?' My, my, I thought you were children but

obviously, I was wrong, you're both young ladies. Are either of you married yet?'

'No…' said Tegan hesitantly, 'but Caron's got a boyfriend!'

'Really, is he good-looking?' asked Grandpa.

'Dad, behave yourself!' scowled Jennifer.

'Oops, I'm in trouble. We can catch up later when Mummy and Daddy aren't listening,' Grandpa winked. 'Right now, I'm a little tired… If you could show me to my room, porter. I trust it's a ground floor room with en-suite and coffee and tea making facilities?'

'Yes Dad, our best and only guest room with an excellent view of the recycling yard!' said Jennifer.

'Excellent… and where's Leonard?'

'Larry… At least you've remembered I'm married. His flight's been delayed. He should be home at five.'

3. Table for two

For Jennifer and Larry, the first few days were awkward, inconvenient and disruptive but the children loved having Grandpa staying with them. However, as time went by, they began to realise that they had much more time on their hands. True, there were more toys to clear away and messes to clean up… and another mouth to feed, but Grandpa had fully taken over the role as "amuser of the children". They were completely captured by Grandpa's larger-than-life character and his complete indifference to the general problems of life – which Larry and Jennifer always seemed to be submerged in.

'Look at them, they absolutely adore him,' said Jennifer, out of earshot of the playful trio.

'I know. I never thought I'd say this, but, I think I'm beginning to like having him around,' said Larry.

'Sweetheart, I'm touched. Not a senile geriatric then?'

'Oh, he's still that but he's fitting in better than I thought.'

'I think we'll miss him when he goes back.'

'I wouldn't go that far!' snapped Larry.

Grandpa's ear began to burn.

'Act natural, team, I think we're being talked about.'

'They do that all the time,' said Tegan casually, as she finished off crayoning in the red bit of her picture.

'Tell you what, why don't the two of you go out for a meal or something? We'll be fine,' encouraged Grandpa.

'Thanks for the offer, Dad, but no, best that we don't,' said Jennifer.

'I see. You're worried about my dementia. Look, one thing you don't forget and that's how to be responsible. I'm perfectly capable of looking after Candy and Tracy.'

'Caron and Tegan!' scowled Jennifer.

‘That’s what I said!’

‘Grandpa, why don’t you ever call us by our real names?’ asked Tegan.

‘Got to keep up the act,’ whispered Grandpa.

Jennifer and Larry were easily persuaded. Moments later Larry was on the phone, booking a table.

‘Well… alright then, but we’ll ring you… every half an hour. Make sure you answer the phone or we’ll come straight back. Dad, do you think you could give them their supper and put them to bed? Tegan, keep reminding Grandpa, what he has to do.’

‘Don’t worry Mummy.’

Perhaps, going out and leaving someone with dementia, in charge of two six-year-olds, was highly irresponsible, but Larry and Jennifer had been easily lulled. They hadn’t had a night out on their own for months. It was what they deserved – they owed it to themselves. They convinced themselves it would be alright.

‘Remember, answer the phone when it rings – it’s the green button. Any problems, Lloyd and Eileen are next door. There’s sliced ham and cheese in the fridge and the jelly should be set by now. Clean pyjamas are on the bed. A SHORT story, they’ve got to be up for school in the morning,’ chanted Jennifer, hoping she had remembered everything.

‘Yes, yes Judy, trust me. We’ll be fine!’ said Grandpa, calmly.

‘Jennifer!!’

‘Only kidding Jackie.’

Jennifer and Larry kissed their precious children and hesitantly left.

‘Grandpa, you do know Mummy’s name, don’t you?’ asked Tegan, worriedly.

‘Of course, I do. Now then, I have an important story to tell you, certainly not a short one. So, early tea, washed and in bed for seven.’

Naturally, there is nothing better than the enticement of a bedtime story to obtain complete obedience from two excitable children. By five to seven, both were in bed, fed, washed and teeth brushed.

‘Come on Grandpa, hurry up, we’re ready for the story,’ nagged the girls, in unison.

‘Patience, patience, all good things come to those who wait. Just have to do something important. Be with you in a moment.’

The girl’s bedroom was very much a pink-themed room with two

identical single beds, close together. Grandpa sat between them on a small stool.

‘Right then, where shall I start?’

‘At the beginning, silly!’ said Tegan.

‘Right, good place, good place!’

4. Identical twins

‘Once upon a time…

A time, long before Mummy and Daddy were born, there existed a kingdom – a magical kingdom. As you know, in most tales of magical kingdoms, there is usually a certain amount of wickedness and cruelty, but for now, we begin with incompetence, more than anything.’

‘What is incompetence?’ asked Caron.

‘Good question… An example, Daddy’s incompetent when he makes anything or fixes anything.’

‘But Daddy can’t make or fix anything,’ said Tegan.

‘Exactly! Right, where was I? Oh yes, The Kingdom of Marutuk was a very compact, modest little kingdom. A kingdom of just a few thousand people, situated on a flat plain of beautiful, green, fertile land. Perilously high mountains, completely surrounded the kingdom, isolating it and sheltering it from the harsh mountain climate. There was another reason why the climate was so warm and pleasant, but I will go into that later on. Exactly in the centre of this sheltered, pleasant land, perched upon the only small hill, stood the most elaborate of all fantasy castles. Constructed entirely of white marble, solid gold window frames and roofed with the rarest blue dragon scales, it overshadowed the idyllic surrounding farmlands. Things weren’t all rosy though: The people of the kingdom, protected and isolated from the rest of the world, were harshly ruled by evil King Worgin. They had little choice but to accept the way things were and get on with their mostly peaceful, often subjugated… er, bossed about, life.’

‘Grandpa, we know lots of big words. We do go to school you know,’ said Caron sternly.

‘Right, point taken. It was a day, however, when all was not peaceful. For many years, the King had waited for an heir and finally, the day had arrived. It was the King’s decree that when a royal birth was imminent, every church bell in the land, rang loudly and continuously

until the Queen gave birth. For hours, the incessant chiming echoed off the mountainsides. This is where you begin to realise that all was far from perfect in this *idyllic* kingdom. This was the only occasion when the bells rang. No one, apart from royalty, was allowed to do anything noisily: No shouting, no screaming, no cackling, no rambunctious children. To utter so much as a raised voice could result in banishment from the kingdom. It was, after all, a peaceful kingdom – for most of the time.'

'Are we ram… bunctious?' asked Tegan.

'You have your moments,' replied Grandpa.

'Did church bells ring when we were born?' asked Caron.

'I should imagine so. You *are* very special. Anyway, the constant chiming continued for many hours. All through the night and most of the next morning. Then, suddenly, the faint cries of a newborn baby could be heard, reverberating about the castle walls. The people sighed with relief, as peace returned, but it was short-lived. Barely a minute later, the bells began to ring out again. The bell ringers were now very tired and any melody to the ringing had long since waned. The din was awful, the birds couldn't compete so they ceased their chatter and the animals covered their ears with their hoofs. Suddenly, though, it was all over. The ringing of the bells was replaced by the faint cries of another baby. As expected, the Queen had given birth to identical boys.'

'Like us! Twins!' both cried.

'Yes. Naturally, there was a certain amount of disorder in the Queen's boudoir. Two new royal sons, completely expected but completely unprepared for.

The royal midwife now had an immense responsibility resting on her overworked shoulders. Before she could present the babies to the queen, they had to be prepared, bathed and wrapped in spotlessly clean white blankets. Of course, in time, the queen would love her new children, but for the moment, cleanliness was imperative. She simply couldn't tolerate any mess or gooiness that comes with new babies. Yes, it was a quirky realm, a harsh realm, but over the years, the people had become accustomed to the royal foibles.

With the mayhem and predictable eagerness for the queen to see her two babies, the midwife was understandably flustered. She had three helpers, but they were all mostly useless and hysterical. It was an extremely important event.

Being identical twins, the babies really were the same in every

possible way, but it was vital to know which was the firstborn. Only the firstborn would be the one in line to the throne. However, most importantly, only the firstborn could inherit the King's control over the dragons and inherit his magical powers.'

'Dragons?!' said Tegan and Caron together in excitement.

'Yes, real dragons. After a few long chaotic minutes, the midwife and a helper carefully carried the babies into the Queen's boudoir. The baby carried by the midwife had a blue ribbon tied around its wrist to indicate that it was the firstborn. Queen Mererid was eager to see her sons. She appeared to have made a remarkable recovery after her lengthy ordeal.

'My sons, my adorable sons!' she bleated as she clumsily perched one in each arm.

By now, the boudoir was full of dignitaries and the kingdom's elite. They all echoed the queen's words: Yes, yes, adorable, absolutely adorable. Naturally, despite being royalty, they were unquestionably adorable.

Suddenly, unannounced, King Worgin, a scrawny, unkempt man, a good twenty years older than the queen, stormed into the room. As usual, he was not in a good mood. He thundered across the mosaic floor in his heavy leather boots towards the incredibly large poster bed.

'Get out you vermin!' he screamed at more-or-less everyone in the room.

Even his wife quaked in fear. Predictably, the babies began to wail – loudly.

'Control them, wife!' bawled the King.

The Queen did her best to console the newborn, but she was inexperienced in baby calming skills. In fact, she was completely inexperienced in any form of baby-related skills. Feeding, wind-ing, bathing and nappy changing would always be someone else's job. She placed both her children into the specially made royal cot which did little to quieten them.

'Which one is the firstborn?!' he blared.

'The one with the blue ribbon. Please, husband, speak softly,' requested the Queen.

'They're identical,' snapped the King.

'Yes, I know… and handsome,' smiled the Queen.

‘The firstborn shall be named Rosh, the other, Java,’ commanded the King.

‘Yes, good names,’ said the queen quietly, clearly having no say in the matter.

To the Queen's surprise, the king carefully lifted Java, the second born, the one *without* the ribbon, out of the cot.

‘We need a way to identify my firstborn,’ he said callously.

He examined the baby closely and then, without any warning, sliced a deep cut in the baby's forehead with one of his long, sharpened fingernails.’

‘He was a very, very bad King,’ Tegan summarised.

‘Yes, he certainly was. In times gone before, the kingdom was usually ruled by caring kings or queens, but for many years, the evil King Worgin had been on the throne.

As expected, the Queen was mortified. If she had any doubts before, she now knew for certain that her husband was a truly evil tyrant.

‘Attend to him!’ bawled the King, hastily passing the baby back to the Queen.

It was truly horrific. Blood oozed from the cut, quickly covering much of the baby’s tiny face. The Queen screamed for help. Cautiously, the midwife and her staff entered the room and dashed over to the injured child. The king was completely uncaring and ignored the ensuing mayhem. His attention now focused on the firstborn – the one wearing the blue ribbon. He lifted the baby out of the cot and carried him, carefully, away from the turmoil and over to the window.

He whispered softly into the baby’s tiny ear, ‘One day soon, all this will be yours, my son. You will have my powers as I inherited my mother’s powers, as she inherited her father’s powers. You will reign over all the people in the Kingdom of Marutuk. You are very special and I will vow to protect you until my death.’

And… I’ll tell you more tomorrow night, sleepy time now, you two!’

‘Grandpa, are you for real, you’ve only been going for five minutes,’ said Tegan with her hands on her hips.

‘Daddy reads to us for at least an hour,’ said Caron.

‘Hmm, I’m sure he does… Alright then, another ten minutes, but you’ll have to stick up for me if Mummy finds out.’

‘You can count on us, Grandpa.’

5. Childhood

‘Right, where was I?’

‘The nasty King has just nearly cut the baby’s head off,’ said Tegan enthusiastically.

‘Yes, with his evil, pointed fingernail,’ added Caron.

‘Well, that’s a slight exaggeration, but a wound sufficient to leave a lasting scar.’

‘You did say a *deep* cut!’ said Tegan firmly.

‘Like the scar on your forehead, Grandpa?’ suggested Caron.

‘Anyway, the wound became infected and took many months to heal. This resulted in Java being a sickly child, suffering from many diseases throughout his childhood. The firstborn, Rosh, in complete contrast, was strong and healthy, much to the delight of his father. Naturally, Rosh was the privileged one as he would eventually become king. As you know, good Parents never have favourites, but the king was a very bad parent and broke all the rules. The king spoilt Rosh beyond words. Everything he wanted, he had. Java, on the other hand, was despised by the king and treated cruelly. The king had a lot to answer for.

The Queen lived with a constant struggle. She may have been remote and unfeeling to the people of the king’s realm, but she would always love her children equally. However, to upset her husband, the King, was unwise. In his presence, she had to appear to favour Rosh.

In their early years, Rosh and Java were inseparable, they were, after all, twin brothers with the same likes and dislikes. They played and shared their experiences together. Often, they would walk into the distant woods where they would pretend to be marauders, having stick fights or spend hours playing hide and seek. Rosh would sometimes share gifts from the king, with his brother. Despite being identical to look at, they were worlds apart. Rosh wore exquisite, lavish garments often adorned with gold and slept in a very comfortable four-poster bed, in a luxurious bedroom. Java wore little

more than rags and had to sleep with the servants in their quarters. However, none of this mattered, they were both happy – perhaps, if the truth were known, Java more than his brother.

The years passed by. The people of the isolated realm continued to be oppressed and the children quickly became young adults. It was now time for the king to turn his first-born son into a man, ready for the tasks he would eventually have to perform as the Kingdom's ruler. This took all of Rosh's time. learning to ride a horse, use a sword and other matters only known to the king and Rosh were now his priority. Java had to find his own feet. His mother was powerless to help him as she was completely dominated by her husband. Fortunately, a kind couple, the Kingdom's blacksmith and his wife, Dalkus and Junie, took him under their wings. They brought him up and gave him a useful skill. He used this skill and became a bladesmith.'

'Bladesmith?' asked Caron.

'Someone who makes swords and knives. It was a very humble profession for someone second in line to the throne, but he enjoyed the challenge. The good times as brothers now came to an end. Java had some very bleak days during this period but he got over them and, even though I say it myself, he eventually became very a very skilled bladesmith. People from all over the kingdom came to… him for their swords.

Java was now permanently parted from his brother. Years went by with no contact until one day, one unfortunate day, he had a very notable, very familiar customer.'

'It was Rosh, his brother, wasn't it?' suggested Caron.

'Yes, the future king. He was now a man, as was Java. Java obviously knew who he was, but now with long hair, a beard and covered in a day's grime, Rosh didn't recognise his twin brother. Rosh examined the excellent collection of swords for quite a while.

'I'll have this one,' he boomed.

'Certainly. Four pieces of gold please,' said Java.

'Do you know who I am?' boomed Rosh again.

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, you'll know then, that a future king does not carry coinage, you impudent oaf,'

'Well, you're not taking that sword until you've paid for it,' said Java sternly.

‘We’ll see about that,’ Rosh snatched his desired sword off the table, ‘There can be no debts with a dead bladesmith!’ said Rosh, callously.

‘Is Rosh a bad man now?’ asked Tegan.

‘Well, it’s to be expected, he’s had a very evil mentor. What Rosh hadn’t accounted for was that Java was also very skilled with the sword. A sword fight of all sword fights began. It wasn’t long before Java managed to get a clear swipe at Rosh’s arm, cutting it badly. Rosh had no choice but to retreat, dripping in blood, without a sword. It was a dangerous and hollow victory. Java had injured his twin brother the future king. Such an act toward royalty would inevitably be punished most severely.

It wasn’t long before several guards came for Java who took him directly before the King and Queen – with injured Rosh, by their side.

‘Is this the vermin who has dared to injure my son?’ bawled the King.

‘Yes father,’ said Rosh.’

‘Treat him to a painful lingering death!’ demanded the King to his guards.

‘That’s not fair, father,’ said Java calmly. ‘It was my brother, Rosh, who drew the sword first.’

It took a few moments for it to dawn on them that it was Java, standing before them, dressed in humble clothes with a beard and long hair. The King was naturally shocked, not that he had any thoughts or concerns about his other son. Rosh was far more troubled. Memories flooded back of the good times they’d had together as children. As bad as the King was, he couldn’t put his son to death. Java had to bear another punishment.

It was either to be locked up in the awful dungeons or have him banished from the kingdom.

The queen pleaded with her husband, ‘My King, he is our son, have mercy on him. I beg you, do not banish him to hell and damnation beyond our mountains.’

‘I have made my decision. He will accompany this month’s rebels. I will summon Dirchef at sunrise,’ growled the king.

This was the way of the kingdom: Any troublemakers, gossipers, rowdy people, in fact, anyone not behaving themselves, no matter how insignificant, were taken by Dirchef, the King’s dragon and deposited at the top of the mountain range. No one knew what was beyond the mountains. They were far too steep to climb and violent storms continually raged at the summit. Often, the commotion of the

storms reverberated eerily in the tranquil valley beneath. The mountain range was an effective impenetrable boundary – a boundary to the rest of the world – known as the Netherworld.

By daybreak the following morning, five dissenters, including Java, had been rounded up by the King's guards. A nearby gathering of friends. lovers and family members wept at the thought of never seeing their loved ones again. To be taken out of the kingdom was considered no less than a death sentence.

For over an hour, everyone waited in the chilly morning air until finally, the King arrived with his entourage and cherished son, Rosh, by his side.

'OK, let's do this. I'm starving, haven't had my breakfast yet,' he said with a cruel tease.

He took out a gold horn from one of his larger pockets and blew into it as hard as he could. So awful was the resulting screeching noise that it painfully grated the bones of everyone's inner ear. Fortunately, one blast was enough. Suddenly, the surrounding mountains began to violently shake, but it was not an earthquake. Then a deafening roar began, followed by a gigantic wall of flames which completely surrounded the kingdom. The dragons had awakened. No longer was there a chill in the morning air, the temperature was rapidly rising with the dragon's breath. The King blew the horn again – four blasts this time. Dirchef was the largest and strongest of the dragons and this was his cue. Instantly the flames died down and the ear-splitting roar quietened. Seconds later, the terrifying sight of an enormous dragon emerged from a cave in the mountainside. It was certainly something to behold, but in this King's reign, the summoning of a dragon was often an unwelcome sight.

In fairness, the dragons were mostly docile and harmless. It was the King who exploited their unique attributes with his magic, making them menacing and foreboding. The Dragon's role was supposed to be limited to keeping the kingdom protected and its climate, pleasantly warm. This, they did perfectly – when allowed to.

Dirchef rapidly approached, his proportions were truly gigantuous. His enormous wings caused more backdraft than a hurricane. He landed gracefully, right next to the King. Dirchef knew exactly what to do, he had done it many times before.

Just before the five dissenters climbed into the large wicker basket, Rosh called out.

'Brother… wait.'

Nothing was said, it was far too late to build any bridges. No amount of remorse would ever excuse Rosh's behaviour. He sheepishly approached Java, took off his coat and offered it to him.

'Thank you. My birthday present? Sorry, haven't had time to get you anything… Where's Mother?' asked Java calmly.

Rosh shrugged his shoulders in a manner that spoke a thousand words. It was all very poignant that this should happen on their 21st birthday.

Dirchef bit hard on the thick rope attached to the basket and began flapping his powerful wings. In seconds, the dragon and the wicker basket, containing four terrified passengers and Java, were airborne. In less than a minute, Dirchef had reached the tops of the mountain range and was beginning a gentle descent. The kingdom was now in the distance, far below. The huge splendent castle on the only small hill, that had dominated the skyline all Java's life, was just a blip in the centre of the landscape. They now had a full view of the Netherland, which amounted to snow-covered mountains in all directions, as far as the eye could see. As soon as the basket touched the ground, Dirchef let go of the rope and swooped back towards the kingdom. They were now on their own in a harsh freezing wilderness…

Right, my little cherubs, I think I better leave it there. Second instalment tomorrow. I'll be dog meat if your Mummy finds out you've stayed up this late.'

'Oh, Grandpa, you can't stop there,' moaned Tegan.

'Java will be frozen to death by tomorrow,' said a very concerned Caron.

'No, he won't.'

Just at that moment, they heard the sound of the key in the front door followed by Mum and Dad grumbling about something.

'Oops, I think we're about to be rumbled. Quick, lights out, pretend to be asleep,' whispered Grandpa.

This, they were surprisingly good at. Obviously, they'd had lots of practice. Slowly and quietly, the bedroom door opened.

'Dad, is everything alright? Why are you in here?' whispered Jennifer.

'Just checking on them,' whispered Grandpa. 'They are adorable, you know.'

'Of course, I know. Come on, before we wake them,' whispered

Jennifer.

‘Surprise! We are awake, Mummy! Grandpa’s just been telling us a story,’ cheered Tegan and Caron.

‘Adorable traitors!’ snarled Grandpa with a glint in his eye.

‘About a really bad king… and dragons…’ continued Caron.

‘And Castles… and twins just like us!’ said Tegan, excitedly.

‘No, Tegan, they were boys!’ said Caron sternly.

‘Hmm, has he really! I think I better have a word with Grandpa. Now come on, sleepy time. School in the morning.’

‘OK, Mummy, night, night.’

‘Night, night Gramps.’

‘Gramps now, is it?’ said Jennifer as she gently pushed the bedroom door to.

‘To be honest, I didn’t think you’d be back yet,’ said Grandpa.

‘Thought we’d sneak back and catch you in the act!’ joked Larry.

‘In the act of what?’ said Grandpa, sounding guilty.

‘He’s only joking. Got a damn flat tyre on the way. A whole hour we sat there waiting for the recovery people to arrive.’

‘Couldn’t you have… changed the wheel yourself?’ asked Grandpa tactfully.

‘Could have done, but wasn’t sure where the wheel brace was,’ said Larry, completely excusing himself.

‘The truth is, he wouldn’t know where to start,’ Jennifer scorned. ‘Then I couldn’t get you to answer the phone. We were really worried. We had to come home.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t have been. I don’t remember the phone ringing,’ said Grandpa, truthfully.

‘Well, you wouldn’t,’ muttered Larry under his breath as he tried ringing the house phone on his mobile. It rang out, but the house phone didn’t ring.

‘Looks like there’s another fault on the line,’ said Larry.

‘Useless phone company, they were only here this morning, fixing the noisy line,’ said Jennifer angrily.

‘Perhaps it’s something simple, where’s the line jack?’ asked Grandpa.

‘The what?’ asked Larry.

‘Where the telephone line comes into the house, usually a white plastic box with a lead plugged in it,’ explained Grandpa as simply as he could.

Jennifer knew exactly what her dad meant and went straight over to the box in the corner of the kitchen.

‘The plug’s out. They must have forgotten to put it back in! That explains that then. Let’s have a coffee, I’m parched,’ chirped Jennifer.

‘I’ve got a few things to pack. I’m on long haul from tomorrow. I’ll leave you two to catch up on things,’ said Larry.

Relaxing in front of the fire, coffee in hand, was a good opportunity for a father and daughter chat although Grandpa’s memory, or lack of it, always seemed to get in the way.

‘I’ll never understand how someone who has difficulty in hanging a picture is an airline pilot,’ said Grandpa (Dad).

‘Yes, one of life’s many mysteries, but he is a brilliant pilot with a heart of gold, and I love him,’ said Jennifer, trying to make up for his incompetence. ‘So, the same story you told us when we were children?’

‘Yes, it has to be told… Do they know about your sister and mother yet?’ asked Grandpa (Dad), cautiously.

‘No, they’re far too young!’ snapped Jennifer.

‘I think they could handle it.’

‘Look, I’ve had enough upsets in my life, I don’t want to add any more to it!’ snapped Jennifer.

‘*You’ve* had enough upsets? On your own then?’ said Grandpa (Dad), calmly.

Jennifer, somewhat selfishly, had never thought about it before, but now it suddenly dawned on her. Her dad had also lost a daughter and a wife and no one had ever shown one jot of sympathy towards him. Jennifer, deep down, had always blamed her father for what happened, but this was totally unfair. Somehow, dementia was always the excuse for her not to heal the rift and put things to rest. Well, he’s probably forgotten about them anyway, she would say. It was time for Jennifer to hug her dad, it was long overdue.

‘About time. You don’t know how I’ve missed that,’ said Grandpa with welled-up eyes. ‘This evening brought it all back to me – when I used to read those Clarice Bean stories to you and Gabrielle at that age.

Both of you tucked up in bed… Don't you think they ought to know that you had a twin sister?'

Jennifer thought deeply about many things, tears had already overflowed from her eyes – and then, suddenly, something odd occurred to her.

'Dad, your memory! You've remembered that Larry is a pilot, my sister's name is Gabrielle… and reading the Clarice Bean books to us?'

'I've no idea what you're implying, er, Janice,' teased Grandpa (Dad), with a wink.

6. Home truths

Almost a week went by before there was another opportunity for Grandpa to continue with his epic tale. Jennifer and Larry decided to use Grandpa's services again and go out for a meal with their neighbours, Lloyd and Eileen. It had been a long wait for the children, they desperately wanted to know what happened to Java. Naturally, he read other stories to the girls most nights before they went to sleep, but they had to be stories strictly approved of by their school teacher.

There was a knock on the door.

'That'll be Lloyd and Eileen. Now, are you sure you'll be alright? We should only be a couple of hours. I'll ring you, so make sure you answer the phone!'

'Yes, yes, yes, Mummy,' scoffed the twins.

'I'm talking to Grandpa, not you two! Larry, let the neighbours in.'

Jennifer quickly introduced Lloyd and Eileen to Grandpa and then they hesitantly left. Jennifer was still not completely comfortable, leaving Grandpa looking after the girls.

As before, five to seven and both were in bed, fed, washed and teeth brushed.

'Come on Grandpa, we're waiting!'

Grandpa had a couple of things to do before the girls had his undivided attention.

'Patience, patience. Won't be a moment… Ok, where was I up to?'

'The dragon has carried Java and some other people to the top of a mountain,' said Tegan.

'And it's very cold,' said Caron.

'Thank you. Right, yes, Just as the five men apprehensively stepped out of the basket into some deep, soft, white stuff – they had never seen snow before, Dirchef, the dragon, returned. He filled his massive lungs and directed his fiery breath at the wicker basket. The huge

beast then hovered for a few moments, staring intensely at Java with his large reptilian eyes and then promptly disappeared back into the kingdom.

The burning basket provided temporary heat while they all decided what to do. If nothing else, the extreme cold was certainly going to threaten their chances of survival. As the kingdom was always kept at a balmy temperature, thanks to the dragons, no one ever needed a coat – even a woolly jumper. Consequently, all but Java were dressed inadequately, in thin garments. Of course, Java was hardly going to give up his warm dragon skin coat – the gift from his brother. The other four would just have to try and find other ways to keep warm.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Java received a heavy blow to the back of his neck. He momentarily faltered and then fell to the ground. All four piled onto Java, frantically trying to remove his coat whilst fighting one another at the same time. Fortunately, moments later, Java came around and immediately pushed them off him. None of them was a match for Java. His profession as a Bladesmith had made him strong and hardy.

'Well, it seems you've all shown your true colours. Perhaps for once, the King was right in his decision to banish you,' said Java calmly.

None of them remotely made an apology. This was convenient as Java no longer felt obliged to stay around and help them. He set off in the direction, away from the mountain ridge.

'Fool, where are you going?' shouted one of the men.

'As yet, I have no way of knowing,' Java shouted back.

'You're mad, you are heading into the realms of hell. We have to get back down the mountain into the kingdom!' shouted another.

'Good luck with that, you'll almost certainly die in tying,' muttered Java, as he distanced himself from the rabble.

Java was now completely on his own, venturing into the unknown. He was fighting a deeply ingrained belief that he was heading toward the kingdom of hell also known as the Netherworld. It was thought to be a place so terrible, so horrific that he would be better off dead than venture into its realm. The only rational thing to do was to try and get back into the kingdom but that was not an option. The mountainsides were too sheer to climb down and anyone who returned to the kingdom after banishment would immediately be put to death. The only option was to have an open mind and disregard all that he thought he knew.

For hours, he trudged through the deep snow, but still no devil, just

bitingly cold winds. Perhaps, he thought, the bitingly cold winds were a metaphor for hell, after all, they are insufferable and persistent. He realised that he had to find shelter before nightfall, but as far as his eyes could see, there were only more mountains and more snow. Surely, he thought, the mountains can't carry on forever. He decided to quicken his pace despite being severely tired and hungry.

If it wasn't so cold and terrifying, he could have appreciated the spectacular view. Now, with the falling sun, the snow-covered mountains glowed numerous shades of orange. If nothing else, the Netherworld was beautiful in its own particular way. The wind had now dropped which made the journey slightly less arduous and the air, clearer.

Suddenly something glinted in the shallow sunlight, something directly in his path. He bravely headed towards it. Eventually, the object reflecting the sunlight, filled his vision. He had never seen anything like it before. It was a long, tube-shaped object with smooth sides and windows underneath a large flat appendage, extending outwards. What Java assumed to be the rear of this unearthly machine were three smaller flat appendages jutting out of the body. The front was severely damaged where it had collided with a large unyielding rock. An evil-looking device was now partly exposed, dripping fluids, behind the shiny flat material.'

'I know what it is,' said Tegan eagerly, 'it's a little aeroplane like Daddy sometimes flies.'

'Clever girl,' praised Grandpa.

'I knew that even before you,' Caron sneered.

'You're both very, very clever children. Right, to continue… Suddenly he froze on the spot. There were two people inside, slumped forward and covered in blood. He wondered if they were dead or just sleeping. He watched them for some time, but they didn't move. Java concluded that they were dead, but their lives had ended quite recently. Ignoring all dangers, he knew he had to get inside the unearthly object. It would offer shelter for the night and there may even be something to eat. As it happened, getting inside was not difficult. He pulled at a metal device and the side of the object opened.

'It's a door!' he said out loud.

'He's a bit stupid, isn't he?' suggested Caron.

'Not really, don't forget, he'd never seen anything like this before. His idea of a door was a big heavy thing made of wood. The most

advanced machine he had ever seen was a horse and cart. This was equivalent to you seeing an alien spaceship.

He lifted the two dead bodies out of the object and laid them gently on the snow. His heart raced as he cautiously climbed inside and closed the door. He expected to be confronted with demons or unworldly magic but instead, he was pleasantly surprised. The sun had warmed up the interior and the seat was extremely comfortable. He rummaged around and discovered several small parcels wrapped in a strange silky covering. Bravely, he tore off the strange material to reveal a small bar of something brown and sticky. Could this be food, he asked himself. He was starving, he simply had to take the risk. Throwing caution to the wind, he took a bite. To his delight, it was sublime, the most delicious thing he had ever tasted – so sweet with nuts and dried grapes inside.

'It's a chocolate bar!' exclaimed Caron.

'That's right, a *Double Decker* to be precise… 'Well, if this is what the devil eats, perhaps hell's not such a bad place after all,' he thought.

Now, for the time being, Java was warm, comfortable and full of saturated fats and sugars so he fell asleep.

An hour or so later, he woke, uncontrollably shivering in complete darkness. Now night-time, the outside temperature had plummeted. There was only one obvious solution to his discomfort. He had noticed when moving the bodies, that they were both dressed in strange padded clothing. Now dead, surely, one of them wouldn't mind if he borrowed his clothes.

It was a struggle in the bitingly cold wind with only moonlight to lighten his way. After a few long minutes, he was back inside the machine with a collection of garments. It took Java quite a while to master the strange fastening devices that slid up and down, but eventually, he was snugly covered, head to toe, inside the unusual clothing. To Java, they were nothing less than magical. No longer was he cold, in fact, after a few minutes, he was beginning to overheat. He slid down the unusual fastening device at the front of the jacket. Now he could sleep.

The next morning, he woke with a start. For a moment, he was disorientated and then everything fell into place. Gales had returned, battering the strange object that was giving him shelter and protection. He was comfortable to a degree, but he knew his journey had to continue. He had another chocolate bar and stuffed the remaining bars in a pocket of the magical jacket he was wearing. In respect, he had thought of leaving the magical clothes behind, but

needs must. His coat, the gift from his brother, was completely inadequate for the climate and now served as an undergarment. They truly were remarkable clothes, incredibly lightweight, but very effective in keeping him warm – and so many pockets. He discovered an inside pocket with a small pouch in it. In the pouch were many wonderous things: Several wafer-thin parchments and four rectangular parchments made of an unearthly material. On one of them was an extremely lifelike painting of a man, someone he thought he recognised. It looked like Gartu, a renegade and a thief who had been banished from the kingdom some five years ago. 'Perhaps these items will come in handy,' he thought.

Time to leave the comfort of the devil machine.

Up to now, he had barely walked ten kilometres due to the impossible terrain and punishing weather conditions. Now, thankfully, the going seemed to be getting easier. Stride by stride, he was steadily descending, leaving the high mountain peaks above and behind him. The snow began to clear and eventually he reached some sort of gravel track. After a few kilometres, the gravel track opened out onto a flat sandy plain. It truly was the devil's kingdom: cold, dusty and dry.

Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. In the far distance, he spotted a large box-shaped machine on many strange wheels. It was moving very quickly, much quicker than a running horse. It roared loudly like an angry dragon with smoke belching out of the top. Then high above him, he saw several strange spindly machines soaring through the air. They made a different noise, a devilish noise that shook the mountains. Suddenly, another machine passed right over his head as dragons often did in his kingdom, but it wasn't a dragon. Its noise was truly deafening and there were no wings to be seen.'

'I think that's a helicopter,' suggested Tegan.

'Yes, because a helicopter doesn't have wings,' added Caron.

'Spot on, you are clever girls… Java made his way to where the big box-shaped machine passed by. He was surprised to find that it moved along on some sort of wide grey track with a white line down the middle. It was rock hard, but very flat and smooth, exactly what he would expect a devil to ride on.'

'It's just a road, silly man,' said Caron.

'Yes, but Java had never seen a road before, from his perspective it was all very strange and terrifying. Without a doubt, Java was incredibly brave. If he had to, he would stare the devil in the face without fear and hesitation. He stood in the middle of the wide grey

track – the road, and waited. He didn't have to wait long. Another long box-shaped machine on many wheels approached him. Java stood his ground. The box machine became angry and began to make a deafening trumpet noise. Several times it made this horrible deafening noise until it was forced to stop at Java's feet.

'I take it, you want a lift mate?' said the devil inside, but this wasn't Java's language.

One word sounded familiar – lift, which hopefully meant the same in both languages.'

'He's not the devil, he's just a truck driver,' said Tegan.

'Ah yes, but Java didn't know that, he'd never seen a truck before.

The truck driver politely tried to engage in conversation, but to Java's ears, it was just gibberish. Besides, he had no intention of conversing with a demon from hell. The driver had no choice but to meddle with something in the machine that made loud, strange music.'

'Grandpa, that's the radio, silly,' said Tegan.

'Spot on, a radio. Java had to admit that he quite liked this devil music, magically coming out of thin air.

After two long hours, the devil machine pulled up alongside several other large devil machines, next to a building with giant-sized letters on the roof.

'As far as I'm going, bud!' said the driver.

For what good it was, Java thanked him in his own language. He followed the driver into the building and watched him as he went up to a very long bench and spoke to a young woman standing behind it. He then handed her a thin parchment. Java correctly assumed that he had asked for food and then paid for it with a thin parchment. Now he realised that the thin parchments he had taken from Gartu, were some sort of coinage, and he had lots of them. He didn't know how to say 'same as that man ordered' so he pointed at the driver and then pointed at himself.

'One, fifty,' said the waitress without a please.

Java hesitantly pulled out the leather pouch from his inside pocket and handed her one of the thin parchments.

'Dollars, eh? Nothing smaller than fifty?' asked the abrupt waitress.

Java shrugged his shoulders and then the waitress irately filled his hands with several more parchments and a few coins. He fumbled for a while, placing everything inside the leather pouch and then went to

sit at an empty table. Unknowingly, while he was fumbling with the pouch, he had dropped one of the smooth parchments on the floor. It happened to be the one with Gartu's picture on it. The waitress picked it up and examined it. Clearly, it wasn't the same face as the man who dropped it. She disappeared into a back room.

A few minutes later, more food than he knew what to do, with was brought to his table – along with an enormous glass of golden liquid. The food was delicious and the drink was the best ale he'd ever had to his lips.

'I think I'm liking this Netherworld, more and more by the minute,' he said to himself.

By the time he had eaten all the strange and wonderful food and drank the beverage, a much smaller devil machine, with a blue flashing light, had pulled up outside. There was only ever one course of action for Java in this strange new evil place and that was to just go with the flow. Certainly, never to be a nuisance, never complain and avoid, at all costs, killing anyone – unless he really had to.

A while later he found himself in another building, in a small room, being bombarded with questions that he didn't understand. The questions obviously referred to the smooth parchment, Gartu's identity card, that he had acquired. To be fair, Java held nothing back. He told the two angry ranting men exactly where he had had it from, but they didn't understand a word.

'This is useless! Get onto headquarters. See what you can get on this ID. And while you're at it, get a flaming translator!' said one of the angry men.

'Translator for what language?'

'Let's start with some kind of English!'

'Grandpa! Isn't flaming, a swear word?' asked Tegan, sternly.

'Not really… Anyway, sometimes you have to swear just a little bit to make a point.'

'Miss Stanley says people only swear because they don't know enough adjectives,' said Caron, intelligently.

'She does, does she? Can't be married then! Anyway, I can see you're both tired. I think we ought to stop there,'

'Just a few more minutes Grandpa, please!' pleaded the girls together.

'OK, just a few more minutes, and then sleep!

As we know, he hadn't really stolen the identity card, just sort of

inherited it, but in the eyes of the law, possessing someone else's identity card was a serious crime. He waited in the room for what seemed like an eternity. During his wait, he was supplied with many mugs of hot brown liquid which was not only enjoyable but made him feel good and alert. He didn't know what they did for toilets in this netherworld so he did what he thought he was supposed to do and peed several times in the corner of the room. Unfortunately, in this new world, the floor was smooth and shiny so the wee didn't soak away. The puddle got bigger and bigger until it flowed all the way across the room.'

'Eeeuck!' Tegan and Caron uttered in disgust, in a way, most typical six-year-olds would.

'Eventually, the door swung open and two people burst into the room. One was a neatly dressed man and the other was a female temptress with a painted face and painted nails, showing most of her bare legs.

'Do you speak English?' asked the temptress woman, in English.

Sorry, don't understand a word you're saying,' said Java in his own language.

'Welsh!', she cheered, 'He's speaking Welsh, I'm sure of it.'

'Well, can you speak Welsh?' asked the neatly dressed man, irritatedly.

'No, but I know someone who can and she only lives about an hour away!'

After another couple of hours' wait… without a drink, the neatly dressed man returned with another woman. This time the woman was much younger and revealed even more of her legs… and arms. Her skin was as smooth as peach skin and her hair so straight and silky that only the devil could have made it that way. Java instantly felt strong animal feelings for her but he knew this was how the devil worked. He was strong, he would ignore her seductiveness.

'Hello, I'm Bethan, what's your name?' asked the young woman.

'Java, second in line to the Kingdom of Marutuk.'

It was true, Java's tongue was Welsh, albeit an ancient version of the language, but he was perfectly intelligible.

'We're in!' cheered the neatly dressed man. 'Ask him where he got the ID card from. Tell him, we need to find the cardholder – urgently!'

'We need to know where you found the ID card?' asked Bethan, softly.

Once Java realised that the parchment with Gartu's picture on it was called an ID card, he told them as much as he could: The strange

machine that he slept in overnight, the chocolate bars and the magical clothes that he was still wearing – and beginning to overheat in. However, he refrained from telling them about the kingdom, the dragons and his father's magic.

'Could you take us to the strange machine… the crashed aeroplane?' asked Bethan.

Java laughed nervously. A twenty-kilometre trek across an insufferable cold and perilous mountain was not something he particularly wanted to do again.

'Too difficult, too far, too tired!' snapped Java.

'No, no, you misunderstand, we'll go in a helicopter,' said Bethan.

'Helicopter?' puzzled Java.

'A flying machine without wings?' said Bethan, as if talking to a simpleton.

'Oh yes, I've seen them. Devil machines, they fly around like wounded dragons,' said Java.

'Devil machines? Wounded dragons? Where the hell, has this chap come from?' puzzled the neatly dressed man.

'Where have you come from? What is your hometown?' asked Bethan in a softer tone.

'Marutuk,' said Java without hesitation.

Naturally, the Kingdom of Marutuk wasn't on any map.

And that, my cherubs, is a good place to stop.'

The children had a brief moan and then sank into their pillows, falling asleep, instantly. Just at that exact moment, Jennifer and Larry quietly entered the bedroom.

'They're flat out,' whispered Grandpa.

Mum and Dad kissed them and then all crept out of the room. Grandpa couldn't help but notice that Jennifer was not in the best of moods.

'We've been ringing and ringing. Why didn't you answer the phone?' she snapped.

'Hasn't rung here,' said Grandpa calmly.

Larry tested the house phone again from his mobile, but it didn't ring. Without hesitation, Jennifer went over to the box on the wall, the plug

was out – again.

‘Dad, what exactly is going on?’ she bawled as loudly as she dared.

Grandpa didn’t say anything for a moment, he had to think on his feet.

‘Leave the plug out and turn your mobiles off,’ said Grandpa firmly.

‘Why would we want to do that?’ said Jennifer, angrily.

‘Just do it! … Please!’

They decided to go along with his strange behaviour and humour him, just for a while.

‘Now turn your mobiles off.’

‘This is ridiculous!’ protested Larry.

‘Just do as he says, it’s probably his medication,’ said Jennifer.

‘Right… Firstly, I lied. I sort of started the fire, but it was only in my room. The rest of the home is OK, although a bit of refurbishment wouldn’t go amiss.’

‘You what?!’ said Jennifer and Larry, angrily and together.

‘I had to get away for a while without suspicion. Secondly, and this may come as a shock to you, I haven’t got dementia. I’ve never had dementia. My memory is perfectly intact. It was the best way to keep them off my back.’

‘Who off your back? Dad, this has gone far enough,’ chided Jennifer.

‘Thirdly, have a look under that coffee table.’

Larry decided to humour the senile geriatric that he had always maintained that he was and look under the table.

‘What the…?’ puzzled Larry, as he detached a small plastic box, hidden underneath.

‘I’ve managed to find four of them up to now but no doubt there will be a few more scattered about the house. They’re listening bugs that connect to your wi-fi connection. As long as that plugs out, the wi-fi is disconnected.’

‘Dad, you’re scaring me, what the hell is going on?’

‘It’s about time you know the truth. There’s something I have to show you. Larry, would you mind fetching my suitcase,’

Jennifer was visibly trembling, she had never seen her dad like this. All her life he had been light-hearted, calm and as easy-going as they

come. Suddenly it seems, he wasn't the dad she thought he was.

Larry returned with the suitcase. Grandpa opened it and pulled out a false bottom. There, before them, edged with pure gold and decorated with countless diamonds, was the coat that Rosh had given Java.

'That story I told you as a child, the story I am now telling Tegan and Caron, is real. It happened, it is still happening. I am Java Marutuk.'

'Shall I ring the home?' suggested Larry.

Jennifer didn't answer, instead, she decided to examine the coat.

'OK, you still don't believe me, there is one more thing…'

'Larry, I'm sure these are real diamonds, and real gold and the leather is like nothing I've ever seen,' said Jennifer slight mellowing.

'Dragon skin. It's virtually indestructible,' said Grandpa (Java) calmly.

'You said one more thing?' said Larry, showing a margin of interest in Java's madness.

'There is, but it's a last resort.'

'This is complete madness. Dragons, kingdoms, magic. Those things don't exist!' Jennifer jabbered.

'That's what the authorities want you to think, but I can assure you the magical Kingdom of Marutuk does exist – well, it did exist,' Grandpa insisted.

'I think I've heard enough. This has gone too far. Your father's become delusional. I'm phoning the dementia clinic. We can't cope with this,' said Larry.

Larry turned his mobile back on and selected the number for the clinic.

'Larry, I really would rather you didn't. Please, turn your phone off,' pleaded Grandpa.

'It's ringing!' said Larry.

Grandpa (Java) had no choice, Larry had to be stopped, and quickly. He had to aim carefully. His son-in-law was irritating at best of times but he has no intention of hurting him. He aimed his forefinger at the mobile phone. Suddenly, a small, intense blue, bolt of lightning, shot across the room from his finger and hit the phone, severely singing the case.

It was a while before anyone said anything – almost as though time was standing still. Larry and Jennifer were lost for words and Grandpa

wondered if he'd slightly overreacted.

'I did say it was the last resort. Sorry, I'll buy you a new one,' apologised Grandpa.

'You'll do no such thing! He should have listened to you!' said Jennifer.

Larry had to sit down, but first, he poured himself a large whiskey.

'I think we all need one,' said Jennifer.

'Well, at least you might believe me now. Sorry to put you through this, but it's time you knew the truth.'

'That was real… lightening, coming out of your finger!' said a bewildered Jennifer.

'I know, weird, isn't it? Found out I could do that by accident.'

'And that's how you set your room on fire?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. It frightened the living daylights out of me but it was a means to an end. Conveniently, the fire brigade assumed it was a faulty electric blanket. The thing is, I shouldn't be able to do that. I shouldn't have any connection with the Kingdom after all these years, especially being so far away. Now, though, suddenly, something is compelling me to return – as though a dreadful event has befallen the kingdom. The long and short of it is that I need you to help me get back there.'

'I can't take all this in. A few moments ago, I was ready to wipe the floor with you for being irresponsible. Now it turns out that you're some kind of sorcerer,' said Jennifer, gulping her whiskey.

'Accepting all this is true, and not a clever magic trick, where exactly is this magical Kingdom?' asked Larry tentatively.

Grandpa whispered the location into Jennifer's ear and then Larry's.

But that's near on seven thousand miles away! Can't you summon up a dragon or something,' said Larry with a sneer.

Grandpa ignored his derision but had to admit he'd thought about a dragon taxi. There were now a hundred questions that needed to be asked, but silence fell as Jennifer and Larry absorbed the truly momentous recent revelations. Jennifer wished she paid more attention to her dad when he told the story he was now telling Tegan and Caron. However, she and her departed twin sister were only seven then.

Grandpa had an important question to ask,

‘Who was the firstborn, Tegan or Caron?’

‘Neither, had a caesarean, but you probably wouldn’t have known that. I assume both came out together, why?’ asked Jennifer curiously.

‘Hmm, that could be interesting,’ said Grandpa with a ponderous look.

7. SD card

The remarkable thing about six-year-olds is that they have almost perfect recall, especially when there are two of them to back each other up. Jennifer and Larry, mainly Jennifer, decided to ask their children to bring them up to speed, regarding Grandpa's past. This time Jennifer listened intently as Tegan and Caron very slightly embellished the facts. The account now had to be completed. Grandpa's storytelling skills were now in demand by two more people. As yet, the girls didn't know that Grandpa was, in fact, Java. So, as not to confuse them, he would continue, purely as the narrator. Jennifer disconnected the wi-fi and Larry checked that the mobile phones were powered down. They were now ready and eager. Tegan and Caron huddled around Mummy on the sofa, under a cosy blanket.

'Remind me, where was I up to?'

'Java was going for a ride in a helicopter,' said Caron, excitedly.

'Oh yes… As you recall, Java had been suspended beneath a huge fire-breathing dragon in a basket, so he was hardly going to be overwhelmed with a ride in a noisy, quaking helicopter. With Bethan translating, he directed the pilot to follow the flat, wide, grey track until eventually, he recognised the spot where he had bravely stopped the large devil machine – the truck. It was now a simple matter of heading due west. Miles and miles, they flew, further and further into the inhospitable depths of the mountain range. It was impossible to spot any distinguishing landmarks. Everywhere looked very much the same – snow-covered mountains as far as the eye could see. Often, the decently-dressed man had a small grey box, pressed to his eyes, helping him to see further.'

'Grandpa, why don't you just say binoculars?' asked Tegan.

'Because remember, I'm describing things as Java interpreted them. In hindsight, yes, they were binoculars.'

'Grandpa, we're not stupid, Java is you, isn't he?' said Tegan.

'Why don't you call him John, then?' asked Caron.

‘They’re too clever for their own good,’ said Jennifer.

‘Because, my name’s not John, it’s Grandpa, and don’t you forget it!

Anyway, eventually, the decently-dressed man spotted the crashed aeroplane in the far distance, but then, without any warning, the netherworld machine began to misbehave. A dragon rarely falters in the sky, no matter how sick or injured, but the helicopter had no concerns for the safety of its passengers. The devilish din coming from the machine’s heart began to cough and splutter. The machine began to twirl and fall out of the sky. The snow-covered rocks rapidly approached. Java’s fate was insight but the machine had a good pilot. Somehow, he forced the machine to make a soft landing by frantically pulling levers and pushing pedals.’

It was now apparent that every time Grandpa said Java, the girls giggled and made a point of staring at him. Grandpa had to give in to six-year-old girl pressure.

‘Alright, alright, you win. As you’ve guessed, Java is me.’

‘Grandpa, we didn’t guess, we knew all along because you have that scar on your forehead,’ said Tegan.

‘And your other name is Marutuk,’ said Caron.

‘Hmm, nothing gets past you two!’

To continue… We were all shaken up, but the helicopter was intact and upright. The decently-dressed man, Bethan and myself, trudged the kilometre or so over to the crashed plane while the pilot checked over the helicopter. Everything I had told them, checked out. They concluded that nothing I had done was particularly unlawful, I’d just borrowed clothing from a dead man to keep warm.’

‘And you borrowed quite a few chocolate bars as well!’ said Caron sternly.

‘Well, I was hungry!

There was no room in the helicopter for the dead men, that was the air-rescue people’s job, so we left the aircraft as it was and walked back to the helicopter. Despite the cold, it was quite enjoyable and memorable. Bethan and I ended up having a snowball fight. She wanted to know all about me, I didn’t tell her anything. I wanted to know all about her, she told me everything. I was dirty, probably reeked to high heaven and had things growing in my hair. Her odour was of angel breath and her hair made on God's own loom.’

‘Hang on, hang on, I’ve just clicked. Mother was Welsh, she came from South America. Bethan is short for Elizabeth. Mother’s name was

Elizabeth!' gasped Jennifer.

'Mummy, just wait, you'll find out soon enough,' said Tegan prudently.

'We got back to the helicopter, quicker than we really wanted to. The decently-dressed man and the pilot were waiting for us with the engines running and their tempers also running. Thankfully, the helicopter was in perfect working order. We took off without a fuss and returned to civilisation – to the Netherworld. I have to admit that I was being successfully seduced in this devil's kingdom, in many ways. After that, they let me go even though, in truth, I had nowhere to go, but Bethan kindly came to my rescue. She offered me somewhere to stay. Naturally, I insisted on reimbursing her.

'I bet you did!' said Jennifer.

'Mummy, don't be rude,' snapped Caron.

'Thank you, Caron. The first thing she did when we got to her house was to push me into a small room and told me to take my clothes off.'

'Dad! The children!' snapped Jennifer.

'It was her bathroom! In this room, there were truly magical things: Strange cleaning liquids, a device with no visible blade that removed the hair on my face, a small brush on a stick for my teeth and hot water, hot running water – all amazing! Bethan also provided me with a gown made of a soft warm material. An hour later, I emerged as a completely different species. The next day, Bethan sorted out some proper clothes for me.'

'Grandpa, did you kiss Bethan?' asked Caron, innocently.

'Caron, those are things you shouldn't ask,' said Daddy sternly.

'Over the next few weeks, she became my English teacher.'

'Is that all she became?' sneered Jennifer.

'Mummy, those are things you shouldn't ask,' said Tegan.

'During this time, many things I was unaware of, were developing elsewhere. The mountain rescue helicopter that followed also had problems with its engine. The consequences were far worse this time. It crashed heavily into a rocky ridge and unfortunately, three of the crew were seriously injured. Another rescue helicopter was sent out. Again, it had problems with its engine and barely averted crashing. Perhaps a more skilled pilot this time. A pattern was developing. Three helicopters and a small aeroplane coming to grief in the same area? Too much of a coincidence. The next step was to send unworldly

flying machines, buzzing like enormous wasps, over the airspace.'

'You mean drones?' suggested Larry.

'Yes, they all crashed. By now, the United States defence department began to take notice. A hefty team of scientific investigators were sent all the way to Chile. Eventually, they had to conclude that, no matter how implausible, there seemed to be a circular zone, approximately 20 km across, where the laws of science were interfered with. Within this zone, deep within the Patagonia ice field, anything containing technology would not penetrate. Even the brainiest scientist had no explanation for it. Nothing showed up on their expensive instruments. It was a complete mystery. Predictably, it called for further investigation.

Why can't people just leave things alone? Obviously, there was a reason why the technology barrier was there. The kingdom had to remain undiscovered, hidden and isolated. However, the Netherworld wouldn't let it go, they had to poke their noses in. The scientists could only think of one explanation: A UFO must have crashed in the mountains and some kind of advanced alien technology was creating the barrier. Of course, they were wildly off the mark on all counts. The true reason was much more far-fetched than that!

Three Chinook helicopters filled with a crack team of eighty army commandos were sent in. They hovered just outside the area of disruption – the technology barrier, while the troops abseiled down long ropes into the snow. It was far too dangerous to touch down. The highly trained soldiers then trekked the final five kilometres across the demanding terrain to the mountain ridge, overlooking the kingdom. All radio contact was lost inside the zone preventing them from relaying back the incredible sight that greeted them. In comparison, a crashed alien flying saucer would have been a disappointment. Spreading out for miles, below them was a beautiful ancient kingdom complete with a fantasy castle surrounded by hundreds of small stone houses. It was like Disney World on a grand scale, but without the fun and the gaudy colour schemes.

Without hesitation, they began their attempted invasion of the dragon kingdom. I say attempted, because, right from the start, it was a no-win situation. They really should have been warned. Many climbing ropes were thrown down the steep mountainsides and dozens of the crack commandos began to descend into the kingdom.

Then the Dragons awakened.

You couldn't really blame the dragons. Their two main objectives in their long humdrum existence were to keep the kingdom warm and

keep the kingdom protected. This is what they did – to the best of their ability. Unfortunately for the commandos, they were sitting targets, or to be more accurate, dangling targets. Dozens of enormous dark purple and brown dragons emerged from their mountain caves. The soldiers didn't stand a chance. Their automatic rifles were completely useless against the dragon's indestructible anatomy. Some dragons were a little peckish and ate them, but mostly, they were incinerated to a crisp. It was all over in a few minutes – none survived. None would want to survive that.

Forty-seven soldiers painfully lost their lives on that terrible day. I blame myself: If I hadn't taken Gartu's wallet, if I hadn't dropped his ID card, if I hadn't taken them to the crashed plane, none of it would have happened. Forty-seven lives, pointlessly lost, just like that. They never gave me a chance to warn them.'

'Grandpa, is this story real because you've got a tear in your eye?' asked Tegan, softly.

Tegan wanted to go over and cuddle Grandpa, but Jennifer discretely shook her head.

'I certainly wouldn't blame yourself. They would have found the crashed plane eventually, without your help. The outcome would have been exactly the same,' said Larry, trying his best to be supportive.

'What happened after that?' asked Jennifer.

'Questions needed to be answered and a good starting point was me. It was fairly obvious to all concerned, that my journey had begun deep within the mountains. Where else could I have come from but the Kingdom? It wasn't difficult to find me.'

'Don't tell me, you were with Bethan,' said Jennifer curtly.

'Several black-suited men wearing dark sunglasses called for me. They wouldn't take no for an answer, I had to go with them. They whisked me off in a luxurious car, as black as devil's blood. I wondered if I'd ever see Bethan again. It was a long journey. No one said a word, which was a pity, I could have practised my English on them. Eventually, I found myself sitting in front of six grim-looking men, four of them in uniforms, two in grey pinstripe suits. They proceeded to tell me everything that had happened via a snooty female translator, not at all like Bethan.

'Forty-seven men dead! Forty-seven of our best men slaughtered! Forty-seven families now without a husband and father,' they chanted at me. It was as though it was all my fault. I had to fight my corner.

'Yes, it is tragic, but you were unprovoked and went in looking for a

fight. If you'd told me of your intentions, I would have warned you what was likely to happen. Anyway, I suppose you're going to tell me that the automatic weapons your soldiers were carrying were just fashionable accessories?' I suggested, confidently.

'Enough of this! In my opinion, we should nuke the place!' bawled one of the uniformed men.

'You really do have one-track minds in this Satan's Kingdom of yours. Slaughter, over a thousand completely innocent people, along with their kingdom, in retaliation for forty-seven soldiers who went in, guns blazing!' I said to them via the translator.

It was clear that they were having none of it. The kingdom was a viable threat, as simple as that. I thought if I told them about the sacred chronicles of the Kingdom – how the Marutuk people came into existence, maybe then they'd show a little humility. Of course, whether they would believe me or not was another thing.

I began uneasily. I told them that countless centuries ago, dragons were commonplace.'

'Grandpa, don't be silly, dragons don't exist, they are just mythical creatures!' said Caron with her hands on her hips.

'How old are you? Six going on thirty-six, I think. I must admit, that's a slightly milder response than I got from the people on the other side of the desk. Obviously, a bunch of narrow-minded bureaucrats. The surviving commandos must have given them a true account of what happened. I ignored their sceptical attitude and went on to say that for obvious reasons, this fact had been erased from history. I explained that dragons are simply a branch of the lizard family and lizards are still commonplace. Just like horses, elephants and camels, they once had important uses, mainly for lifting and carrying things.'

'Like helicopters?' suggested Tegan.

'Exactly like helicopters. I told them, that with changing times, people lost the need for such creatures. The whole concept of dragons and their magic became outdated. They also tended to accidentally start a lot of fires and occasionally, eat people. Naturally, they couldn't just be abandoned and allowed to become extinct. There had to be a permanent solution to preserve these magnificent creatures.

I waited for any snide comments but none came. It seemed I had finally captured their attention so I pressed on.

After much deliberation, far and wide, it was decided that all the young, healthy dragons would be gathered and taken to a place, completely isolated and completely inaccessible. Somewhere, so

remote that the evolving world would be completely unaware of its existence. Along with the dragons, a thousand or so people would accompany them. It was to be a mutual arrangement. These people would ensure that the dragons survived and the dragons would do what they always did best – protect and serve. All over the known world, a suitable community was sought to accompany the dragons. After much deliberation, an ancient city, once known as Trellech, was finally chosen. This city happened to be located in a place now known as Wales in Great Britain. Surprisingly enough, there were no protests, they accepted the decision wholeheartedly.

Many skilled craftsmen were set to work, making numerous large wicker baskets for the Dragons to carry the people of Trellech to their new home. The dragons had to be gathered from all corners of the world. A special horn was carved from dragon's teeth and coated in dragon sweat – which happened to be liquid gold.

'Liquid gold? Oh, come on now, we all know gold is a solid. This has gone on far enough!' spouted one of the men in suits.

'Pipe down Smythe. If there are dragons it stands to reason that there is liquid gold,' said one of the uniformed men.

Clearly, I was winning them over. King Debrux, of the highest throne in the known world, stood on the vast flat plain of Apixoban and blew the precious horn. He blew it continuously for exactly one minute. He had purposely trained his lungs for this task. It was a truly momentous and unprecedented occasion. Nothing happened at first, but as time passed, one by one, the dragons began to arrive. After three days, the vast flat plain was completely covered in magnificent dragons of many colours. Hundreds and hundreds of enormous fire-breathing creatures making thunderous, deafening noises, enough to wake the dead. Every single living dragon from all the known lands was there. It was an awesome sight. Thousands of cows and sheep were provided by farmers for food – it was a wise precaution. A hungry dragon is not all that particular where his food comes from. The older dragons, the ones who could no longer breed, would stay behind. Realistically, it was doubtful if they would be able to make the journey.

All the men, women and children from Trellech convened in their hundreds, on the huge grassy plain. They began clambering, orderly, into the many wicker baskets with just a few of their most treasured possessions. They were no less than heroes. The dragons knew exactly what to do. They gently pushed their heads through specially fashioned wicker loops, hovering above the body of the baskets and then gracefully unfurled their immense wings. The dragons were ready and so were the Trellechians. Many dragons began to weep,

especially the older ones who would be left behind, but it had been decided. The trumpets sounded, the drums deafened and then lift-off on an unprecedented scale. The skies darkened as thousands of dragon wings blocked out the sun. The resulting backdraft of the wings was so immense that people were blown off their feet and several trees became uprooted. The people of Trellech would never be seen again.

The journey was arduous, to say the least. It would be many thousands of miles, mostly across the vast uncharted ocean. It became necessary for the dragons to stop after two days, to take rest and food. They touched down on a group of islands now known as Cape Verde. Unfortunately, there was a complete absence of any farm animals on the peaceful islands, so the entire indigenous population just had to do. The Dragons needed food and that was that.'

'That's horrible!' said Caron.

'Do you think they tasted like chicken?' asked Tegan.

'Hmm, moving on. After many more thousand miles, across empty seas and barren landscapes, finally, the dragons found a suitable place and landed. The entire population, formerly of Trellech, were starving, dehydrated and exhausted. For countless hours they had been crammed in the baskets like sardines in a can. It was impossible to sit down, many were unconscious while remaining standing up. The conditions were truly horrendous.

Deep within an inhospitable mountain range, a flat expanse of land, surrounded by impossibly steep mountains, became their new home. Immediately, the dragons set to work with their fiery breath and in no time, transformed the landscape. All the snow and ice melted away and the climate became pleasantly warm. Now conveniently revealed, were hundreds of petrified animals, scattered across the land. It was food in an abundance, perfectly preserved, just as though they'd been in a deep freezer. Many trees were felled and the wood was used to cook the food, although the dragons were perfectly happy with their food served cold. Quickly, the land became lush and fertile. Before long, it was a paradise in every way. The dragons made their home in caves on the mountainsides. From high above the flatlands, they watched over and protected the people. Everything was perfect, everything was idyllic and everybody was free to go about their daily business, but not for long. As always, someone wanted to be in charge.

The people of the realm didn't particularly want a leader, everything was just fine as it was. However, a man named Marutuk was clued up on magic. He had stolen the magical horn from King Debrux. He also had the foresight to bring with him, a small phial of dragon's tears

taken from one of the elder dragons. He sat on the small rise where his castle would eventually be built and drank the dragon tears. For hours, he battled with agonising pains as the fluid passed through his body. However, at the end of the ordeal, he had developed many magical powers. These magical powers included complete control over the dragons. The realm now became a kingdom complete with a self-appointed king. A peculiar consequence of the sorcery: Only identical twins would ever be born to his lineage and only the firstborn would inherit his magical powers.

For millennia, the kingdom of Marutuk has remained the same. As you now know, any form of technology is rejected. Technology would bring change, but more so, technology would be a threat to magic. Anything that could disrupt or endanger the kingdom had to be avoided. Rulers came and went, some very good, some very bad and some in between. Regardless, though, the people of the Marutuk Kingdom have always strived to be happy.

'If you were all happy, why did you leave the kingdom,' asked another uniformed man.

If you must know, I was banished. It was a punishment for having a skirmish with the king's son, I said quietly.

What more could I say?'

'Well, I'd be very surprised if they believed one word of that,' said Larry.

'They could do no other, they had compelling evidence. As I found out later, they had photographs revealing everything.

They told me to leave the room while they discussed the matter. Ten minutes later, they called me back in. There was only one sensible way forward from this self-made tragedy. They had to walk away and cover their tracks.

The whole encounter had to be kept from the media at all costs, especially as dragons were very much involved. From immediate effect, the airspace surrounding the kingdom became a no-fly zone and the surrounding mountains were strictly off-limits. An armed border patrol would extend all the way around the exclusion zone. It was the only way. To account for the forty-seven dead commandos, it would be explained away by a tragic helicopter crash over the Argentine sea. All the surviving commandos underwent intense phycological conditioning until they firmly believed that it was never more than a fantasy. It was a tall order, but an easier option than admitting to the existence of dragons to the whole world. As it turned out, though, there *was* a remaining loose end.'

‘Are you the loose end, Grandpa?’ asked’ Tegan.

‘That isn’t the end of the story, is it, Grandpa?’ asked Caron.

‘Of course, not, it’s just the beginning, but I think Mummy and Daddy have something to tell you now.’

‘Too right we have. It’s way past your bedtime!’ said Mummy firmly.

Once the children were in bed and fast asleep – it took quite a while, Jennifer turned the fire up, Larry poured some wine, put on some background music and they all settled back into their respective chairs.

‘I had to stop there. I didn’t want the twins to hear what I have to say next.’

‘You do realise, the story will be all around school tomorrow,’ said Larry.

‘Yes, in double-quick time!’ said Jennifer.

‘That’s the benefit of having twins. Anyway, to continue…

At that point, I suspected the worst. After all, it was the devil’s kingdom – the Netherworld. I had no identity, no passport, no social security number, nothing. Strictly speaking, I didn’t exist. They could easily have erased me from existence and no one would ever have known. They were also aware that I stood to earn a fortune if I sold my incredible story. I assured them that I would never do that no matter what I was offered. To divulge the secrets of Marutuk was a betrayal of everything I believed in. Not only that, telling the world would most certainly lead to the downfall of the kingdom, my home and the dragons. It would probably end up as a tourist attraction, probably an extension of the Disney World complex. Dragon World probably!

They seemed to be convinced.

In a way, it restored my faith in this Netherworld. Obviously, they had a conscience. They gave me an identity – John, John Marutuk. Goodness knows what was up with Java. They also gave me a home, a job and indirectly, they indirectly gave me a lovely wife.’

‘Bethany was my mother then?’ nagged Jennifer.

‘I waited a couple of months for the dust to settle before I called on her. The instant she opened the door I realised that I loved her and the rest is history. Shortly, we had two beautiful identical twin daughters and for almost twenty years, everything was rosy.’

‘Then the accident – certainly made up for those rosy years!’ said

Jennifer sternly. ‘Perhaps you’re right, this is the devil’s world,’ she added.

‘I never told your mother about the kingdom, where I came from or who I really was. She never asked and I never told.’

‘All this doesn’t explain why you’re being bugged?’ niggled Larry.

‘I’m coming to that, the loose end. The tiniest of things, no bigger than a fingernail. An SD card, I believe they call them. Obviously, it had been forgotten about and overlooked for months, in the back of a drawer in a government department. It was a memory card from a surviving commando’s camera. I can just imagine the face of the office clerk, whatever, as the contents were displayed on the computer screen. The photographs, no doubt, showed the dragons in their full glory, the kingdom below and the gory massacre. After that, it would only have been a small step to find my name and address.

The whole event was thought to have been firmly put to rest. All the essential details were deleted or shredded, but that pesky little SD card had survived. Apparently, certain electronic devices were not impaired by the technology barrier. Anyway, it seems that someone sold the photos to a media company for a small fortune.’

‘Greedy bast…’ began Larry.

‘Larry!’ snapped Jennifer.

‘Thankfully, the crucial information about where the conflict took place, the location of the Kingdom of Marutuk, was missing. Without that, the whole story was worthless and unsupportable.’

‘So that’s why they focused on you? They assumed you knew where Marutuk was,’ said Jennifer.

‘Which obviously, I did. The surveillance now began. Phone calls at first, then house calls and then they started following me. I wouldn’t tell them anything, wouldn’t admit to anything, but they knew I knew and that was enough for them to relentlessly hound me. I reported it to the police but they had better things to do. Somehow, I managed to keep it from you and your mother, but inwardly it was tearing me apart. They bugged the house and the car, listening to our every word, but it was all pointless, I would never talk about my past.

And then, one awful, terrible day, seven years ago, I’d had enough. As usual, a menacing black car, no doubt, similar to the one parked across the road at this very moment, was ready and waiting to hound me and follow me.’

Jennifer was urged to get up and peek through the curtain.

‘I don’t believe it, a black car! Larry, phone the police!’ Jennifer blurted.

‘I wouldn’t bother, the police won’t do anything. It’s something I’ve learnt to live with.’

‘Larry, go out to them, tell them to go away!’ insisted Jennifer.

‘What if they have guns,’ whimpered Larry as he nervously stood up.

‘Larry, sit down, you won’t achieve anything. That day, seven years ago, I stormed over to the car to have it out with them. For the first time in this Netherworld, I experienced the full extent of the devil’s wrath. They swore at me, spat at me and then used my family to threaten me. They were completely indifferent to what I was going through. Still shaking from the experience, we set off in the car, I forget where we were going.’

‘To Gabrielle’s piano recital,’ said Jennifer quietly.

‘Yes, yes, that was it. I had reached the end of my tether. I was sick and tired of having an evil-looking black car constantly in my rear-view mirror, where ever I went. I put my foot down, they kept up with me. I put my foot down some more and they still stayed right behind me. We were doing nearly eighty in a built-up area. A set of traffic lights were changing to red, I had to stand on the brake pedal. We stopped just in time but the black car behind didn’t and piled, heavily into the back of us. As you know, you and I were in the front, Gabrielle and your mother were in the back, they didn’t stand a chance.’

‘We would have made it across on amber,’ said Jennifer as she began to weep.

‘Don’t you think I don’t know that? I blame myself for everything that day,’ said Grandpa, sinking his head in his hands.

‘I think I’ll go and put the kettle on,’ said Larry.

It was a while before either spoke. Jennifer had always blamed her dad for the death of her twin sister and mother. Because of his erratic driving, she had lost the two people she was most dear to. In those dark days, she had hated him, even despised him. That day, any love she had for her father, instantly dissipated as she watched the life force quickly drain from her cherished backseat passengers. Now though, she finally knew the truth. It wasn’t her father’s fault at all.

Her guilt was almost too much to bear. She went over and sat on his knee, just like she had done as a child and wept on his shoulder. The true mourning could now begin for both of them. It had been put off

for much too long.

‘I tried really hard, but things between me and you were not improving. I realised on that terrible day, that I had lost you, too. The only thing I could think of was to make out that my memory was failing. I faked the onset of dementia. It didn’t take much to convince the experts, they put it down to the trauma of the accident. With a faltering memory, I had a convincing reason not to recall details about the kingdom, and you had no qualms about putting me in a suitable residential home. Hopefully, the evil stalkers would now leave you alone, even leave me alone. All I wanted was that you built up your life again and hope that time would eventually do the healing. I was so pleased when you married Larry, even though I didn’t give you away! And delighted that you were blessed with the cherubs, even though I wasn’t invited to the christening either!’

‘I have a lot of making up to do,’ said Jennifer fighting away more tears.

‘You certainly do!’

8. The adventure begins

Larry returned with the drinks.

‘Well, this morning, I didn’t believe in global warming, now, apparently, I believe in dragons! So, you’re still being hounded and bugged seven years down the line. They don’t give up lightly then?’ said Larry.

‘They did for a while, but like a virulent form of cancer, they came back. In their eyes, it was a hefty investment, paying this clerk, whatever, but one day it was certain to pay off!’

‘Something I’ve been thinking about: Before you rang us to say you were coming to stay, did you happen to mention it to anyone?’ asked Larry.

‘I may have mentioned it to one of the staff, why?’

‘The landline conveniently went noisy, the day before you rang. A couple of days later, a so-called engineer called and checked all the extensions in the house. That’s obviously when the bugs were planted. Somehow, they’d managed to put a fault on the line,’ said Larry.

‘Which proves your room in the home is bugged,’ reasoned Jennifer.

‘Of course, my room is bugged and probably has been for seven years! What’s your point?’ snapped Grandpa.

‘My point is… the speed of the operation. It seems that they act very quickly on what they hear. There has to be a team of people involved, and have been for seven years. These people are going to an awful lot of trouble and expense on your account,’ deduced Larry.

‘Well, they’re bound to be! If a story about dragons and lost kingdoms could be verified in this digital age of smartphones and whatnot, it would turn the world upside down. It would be the story of the millennia. A media tycoon would stand to earn trillions from the publicity,’ said Grandpa.

‘Another thought, you do have one big advantage in all this underhanded surveillance business; these people are hanging on your

every word. You can tell them pretty much anything, it doesn't have to be the truth,' suggested Larry with a lowered voice, just in case any electronic bugs had been overlooked.

'You mean, send them on a wild goose chase?' whispered Jennifer.

'Well, yes,' Larry continued to whisper. 'Send them in the wrong direction while we sneak off in the right direction. Mind you, I won't lie, a seven-thousand-mile trip to an uninhabited, inhospitable part of the world, is not going to be like a trip down to the shops.'

'Is this where the adventure begins then?' said Jennifer, excitedly.

9. The Protectorate

The next day, Grandpa had something important to tell the children – and whoever happened to be listening in.

‘We are all going on a very long journey to the Himalayas to see dragons and a magical kingdom,’ he said, emphasising Himalayas.

Evidently, someone had been listening in as, moments later, the menacing black car screeched off into the distance. Of course, where they were going happened to be on the opposite side of the world from the Himalayas.

There was an awful lot of planning to do.

From the secret compartment in his battered suitcase, Grandpa removed his treasured coat – the gift from his brother. So long had he lived in the Netherworld, that the kingdom almost seemed like a distant dream, but whenever he held the coat, strong memories always came flooding back. He fetched a knife from the kitchen and prised a sizeable diamond out of the dragon skin collar. The sparkling jewel would more than pay for the trip expenses. He checked the breast pocket – he pulled out a small leather pouch he had placed there nearly forty years ago. He opened it up. Inside was a small lock of dark brown hair. For a few moments, he became lost in his thoughts. Jennifer happened to be walking past the open door to his room.

‘Are you alright, Dad?’ she asked, delicately.

‘Yes, fine,’ he said as he discretely put the pouch back in the pocket.

‘You seemed a little preoccupied there for a minute… and you’re not fine, you have a tear in your eye.’

‘I’m just wondering if I’m being unfair – burdening you with all this craziness. Perhaps the home is the best place for me.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, yesterday I was Jennifer Wheaton, today I am a princess, second in line to the throne of Marutuk. Yesterday I didn’t really have a father, he had dementia and I blamed him for everything. Today I realised that I love him very much.’

Jennifer was having a job holding her tears back herself now, but she was helped out by the doorbell ringing.

‘You better go and see who that is,’ said Grandpa gently.

Jennifer dried her eyes, composed herself and hurriedly descended the stairs to open the front door. Two suited, middle-aged men confronted her.

‘Jennifer Wheaton?’

‘Yes, that’s me.’

‘Would you come with us please, we believe your family is in great danger,’ said one of the men sternly.

‘Who are you!? What kind of danger?’ trembled Jennifer.

‘All will be explained. Please come quietly and don’t alert Java.’

Her first thoughts and concerns were towards her daughters. Had something happened to them? Were they safe? Also, how did they know her father’s former name was Java? Who were they? What were these dangers, her family faced? Questions, questions, questions. With her heart racing and pent-up emotions, it was difficult to think straight. She had to leave some sort of indication that she was being taken somewhere against her wishes.

‘Right, OK, just let me get my coat and handbag,’ she said, still trembling.

‘We would appreciate it if you would come right now, as you are,’ said one of the men, sternly.

All Jennifer had a chance to do, was covertly take off her wedding ring and leave it on the side table.

She fully expected to be bundled into the back of the austere black car, as often seen parked across from the house. However, she was politely and considerately ushered into a much friendlier blue car with comfy leather seats and a gentle ambience of classical music. Moments later she was whisking through the streets and then along the highways. Eventually, after half an hour, the car gently pulled up outside an old disused church with wasteland on either side. Despite the terrifying circumstances, she felt a strong urge to do a spot of weeding along the path, up to the heavy oak door. Inside the old run-down building, she was escorted up to the front – the nave, passing many occupied pews.

‘You won’t get away with this. What have you done with my children?’ yelled Jennifer, in front of the small congregation of men

and women shrouded in almost total darkness.

‘We are very sorry if we have worried you, your ladyship. Your children are perfectly safe and at school, where they should be,’ said a random voice from the obscured congregation.

‘You said they were in danger!’ Jennifer nervously shouted into the darkness.

A middle-aged woman, wearing a full-length white cloak, complete with a hood, emerged from the congregation and approached Jennifer. Her face remained in darkness.

‘It wasn’t perhaps the ideal way to get your attention, we apologise for that, but it is vitally important that we talk to you on your own,’ said the woman.

‘You said Ladyship? What the hell’s going on?’ snapped Jennifer.

‘You are the second born of royal blood. Ladyship is your legitimate title!’

‘Well, you know who I am, who might you be?’ asked Jennifer.

‘We are the Protectorate of the dragon realm also known as the Kingdom of Marutuk,’ said the white-cloaked woman. ‘In these circumstances, I am known Chandrella of Musokin, direct descendant of King Debrux of Apixoban and head of the Protectorate.’

‘Alright, I’ll go along with that. After all that my father has told me, I’m becoming accustomed to believing almost anything… Why are you all in darkness, problems with the electricity bill?’ asked Jennifer, still visibly trembling.

‘For our own safety, and yours, it is important that we remain unexposed. In anticipation of your visit to Marutuk, we have brought you here to introduce ourselves and brief you on a few things. Has Java of Marutuk told you about the dragon exodus – the vast plains of Apixoban?’

‘Apixoban? Yes, in great detail.’

‘Did he tell you of the pledge of protection, decreed by King Debrux?’

‘I don’t recall, probably not. Look, are you sure my daughters are alright?’

‘Yes, they are perfectly fine, but ultimately, with your unique ancestry, you are all facing danger and most importantly, the kingdom

is in danger. We are a secret league, originally formed by King Debrux to protect the dragons and the people of Trellech for eternity.'

'A long time then,' said Jennifer, glibly.

'As the centuries have passed by and the world matures, we inherit a role that is becoming ever more challenging to fulfil. The world is now at a pivotal point. With reconnaissance satellites, drones and high-altitude flights, the kingdom is in increasing danger of being discovered,' said Chandrella.

'It has already been discovered – by the military. Forty-seven were killed by dragons, but according to Dad, it's now a designated no-go zone.'

'Yes, we know all about that. It is not the military or governments that we are concerned with, they want it covered up as much as we do. It's the wealthy media corporations that are becoming a serious threat to the containment of the kingdom. If they exposed an ancient kingdom with fire-breathing dragons, quite simply, it would be catastrophic. The dragons would be exploited and ultimately poached to extinction,' said Chandrella.

A male voice piped up from the obscured congregation, 'Do you know that dragon skin is fifty times stronger than carbon fibre and two hundred times more heat resistant than Kevlar? That's just their skin. The lenses in their eyes are pure diamond and their teeth are ten times stronger than tungsten carbide. They are truly a formidable creature.'

'How do you know about the forty-seven killed?' asked Jennifer suspiciously.

'Needless to say, the Protectorate is far-reaching. We have members from all walks of life. It is our job to be aware of all kingdom matters. We have monitored your father for nearly forty years.'

'You mean you've bugged him, hounded him and forced him to live in a home for dementia sufferers for seven years. You were responsible for the death of my mother and sister,' growled Jennifer.

'We have never hounded him. We would never do that. We only exist to protect him. The cars parked outside and the car that followed you on that regretful day, are none of our doing. They are associated with a particular media company, to be precise, the Transtell media giant. They purchased the photographs from a government-employed cleaner.'

'Cleaner? You're joking!'

'We never joke. Needless to say, she never had to clean again.

Incidentally, they have very advanced equipment that uses glass vibration techniques to listen in to your conversations.'

'Turning off the wi-fi and our mobiles wouldn't have made any difference then?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'This is bad, very bad indeed. They know everything, And they know we're not going to the Himalayas?'

'You weren't to know. It was inevitable that they would eventually find out the approximate location of the kingdom. It's something we will now have to try and resolve. However, our main concern now is that Java returns to the kingdom as soon as possible. I believe he is already experiencing strong feelings to return.'

'Why didn't you bring him here instead of me, then?'

'For now, it is important that your father knows nothing of our existence for reasons that will eventually be made clear to you. Fortunately for us, Java, your father, is the only person to have ever been banished from the kingdom and survived in the Netherworld.'

'Well, that's wrong for a start. Dad told me about someone from the kingdom who was found in a crashed plane!'

'Yes, Gartu. He wasn't banished, he left by choice intending to expose the kingdom. Fortunately, he didn't survive long enough to cause us any concern,' said Chandrella, curtly.

'Must have been a resilient chap – scaled the mountains and then trekked for miles across the hostile terrain?'

'Gartu was a shrewd individual. He worked out that somewhere in the kingdom there had to be an outlet for rainwater, melting snow and so on. If there wasn't, the kingdom would eventually fill up like a huge lake.'

'A drain-hole?' suggested Jennifer.

'Yes. He discovered this drain-hole: A network of underground caves, tunnels and waterways, that carried rainwater through the mountains to the other side. That was his escape route, and as it happens, the only practical way in for you.'

'Thanks for the suggestion, but I think we'd much prefer to do it the easy way and fly in, rather than wade up to our necks in fast-flowing water, risk drowning, freezing and all manner of perils,' said Jennifer emphatically.

'I'm sorry, but that's not possible. There is a technological barrier

which circumnavigates the mountains. It repels technology not compatible with the kingdom, as Gartu found out to his cost.'

'Yes, yes, I know all about the barrier. Well, we could walk the last few miles and scramble down the mountainside?'

'The mountainsides are so sheer that even an experienced mountaineer would think twice about taking on the challenge. However, you needn't worry, we will provide you with an expert guide. He will take you every step of the way.'

'Right then, can I go now?' asked Jennifer, hopefully.

'Yes, of course. Thank you for your time and understanding. Remember, it is vitally important that your father knows nothing about us or this meeting. Your guide will contact you shortly. Oh, one more thing, the journey is unsuitable for your children, you'll have to leave them behind. I'm sure Joanne, your mother-in-law, would love to have the children for a few days,' said Chandrella, concluding her role as the spokeswoman.

'Sounds like you know Larry's mother better than I do,' muttered Jennifer.

Just before she left the church building, someone from the congregation emerged out of the darkness and handed her a piece of paper. Printed on it, was the name of an airport and a few other instructions.

Jennifer had been missing from the house for a good hour and a half. Hopefully, no one had noticed.

'I'm back,' she shouted. 'I had to get a few bits from the supermarket,' she lied, hastily putting her ring back on her finger.

Grandpa hurried down the stairs, 'Where've you been? Who was it at the door? You left your wedding ring, why would you do that? I didn't know what to think. I've even went around next door – thought you may have gone there.'

'Dad, Dad, chill! Like I said, just popped down to the shops,' Jennifer lied again.

10. The familiar guide

Jennifer found it hard to keep a secret at the best of times. Now she had a bucket load of secrets to keep. She also had to disappoint the children. It was early evening time, just before bedtime. It was now or never.

‘Girls, you know, sometimes, you have to be disappointed, but it’s always for a good and sensible reason and because Mummy and Daddy love you,’ said Mummy gingerly.

‘Mummy, I hope you’re not going to tell us that we can’t go and see the dragons with you. We WILL be very disappointed and we WILL probably cry for quite a while,’ said Tegan.

‘I have the tissues ready,’ said Mummy.

‘Mummy’s right, it will be very, very dangerous and we would never forgive ourselves if you got burnt… or eaten by a dragon. And besides, you know how you love to stay with Nanny,’ said Daddy.

‘Not nearly as much as seeing dragons,’ said Caron.

‘Will there be compensation? There’s a play tent I would quite like,’ said Tegan.

‘Yes, these girls are definitely growing up far too fast!’ said Mummy.

Java much preferred to be called Grandpa, but somehow, he knew his days were numbered with this title. For nearly four decades he had lived in Vancouver and that was now his hometown in every respect. Not in the slightest was he Java of the magical Marutuk Kingdom anymore. He was John Marutuk, once metal fabricator, once happily married and once the father of *two* beautiful twin daughters. This aside, he had an overwhelming feeling, an inner drive, that he had to return to his roots, his kingdom, never to return. This new world he now lived in would always be the Netherworld, the devil’s realm. Nothing would persuade him otherwise. So many wars, killing, greed, corruption, obscene wealth, and obscene poverty, but it was still wonderful in many ways. This world had its own kind of magic, it was called technology and ironically, he had found that most people in the

devil world were kind and friendly.

Larry burst in, all excited. ‘I’ve got the plane tickets, booked for next Wednesday!’

Jennifer looked at the tickets, then she looked at the piece of paper given to her by the Protectorate, the airports were not the same.

‘You’ll have to change them, we need to go there,’ she said, passing the piece of paper to Larry.

‘Where’ve you had this from? This is two hundred miles from where we need to be,’ said Larry, having expert knowledge of airport locations with his profession.

‘Trust me, we need to go there,’ insisted Jennifer, forcibly holding back from telling Larry about her episode with the Protectorate.

Wednesday arrived all too quickly. Caron and Tegan had been bundled off to Larry’s parents. It never crossed their minds that they may never see their beautiful children again. They were completely heedless of the dangers that the journey may bring. Suitcases were packed, mostly with their warmest clothes. One of the instructions on the piece of paper said: travel light! Jennifer double-checked the travel documents and Larry phoned for a taxi. Grandpa had a good look around. He knew this would be the last time he would see this house again. He regretted not giving his grandchildren an extra hug.

The doorbell rang.

‘That was quick!’ said Larry presuming it was the taxi.

But it wasn’t, it was Lloyd from next door. He also had a suitcase with him.

‘Hi Lloyd, just caught us, our taxi should be here any minute. Come to bid us farewell?’ asked Jennifer, cheerfully. ‘You going somewhere too?’

‘Yes, I’m coming with you. I believe you need a guide,’ said Lloyd with a big grin across his face.

‘Guide? You’re the guide?’ said a stunned Jennifer.

‘Guide? What do you mean, you’re coming with us? You can’t, that’s impossible!’ ranted Larry, thoroughly confused.

‘Larry, we have just got to accept that more things are going on than we realise. Apparently, our neighbour Lloyd is our guide.’ said Jennifer now changing to a sterner tone. ‘You do know about the dragon kingdom and that my dad is Java of Marutuk?’

Lloyd said nothing, just smiled and nodded.

‘I didn’t even know we needed a guide,’ said Larry, scratching his head like Stan Laurel.

It was a bit of a surprise, but yes, Lloyd, their neighbour and friend, just happened to be the guide. In the twenty years they had known each other, he had never let on that he was one of the Protectorates. They could have dug a little deeper and realised that there was a lot more afoot than just coincidence. As Jennifer said, the best way forward was to just accept things, and not ask too many questions.

‘The phrase, it’s a small world, comes to mind, but I think there’s a little more to it than that,’ said Grandpa, close to Jennifer’s ear.

11. Lord Java

The epic journey involving three long flights, covering seven thousand miles and many frayed tempers, began.

Lloyd said very little other than what was necessary. He didn't want to encroach too much on family matters between Jennifer, Larry and Java. He thought it wise to distance himself, spending much of his time on his mobile phone – when he could. He even sat at the opposite end of the plane, on all three legs of the journey.

Finally, after experiencing the insides of four airport terminals with steadily decreasing facilities, they found themselves in a very remote part of the world surrounded by iced-topped mountains. A portly but jolly-looking man holding a placard with the name 'Marutuk' on it, was waiting for them in the small, draughty departure area. He led them out into the chilly air where a rather ropey-looking four-wheel-drive vehicle was waiting.

'This is Pablo. He is going to take us to the chalet and then in the morning, to the glacier face,' said Lloyd, just like a tourist guide would.

They all nodded politely and then piled into the vehicle. Conversations were attempted with Pablo, but he didn't understand a word of English.

It was just as well that it was a 4x4 vehicle as the roads were mostly narrow, dangerous and icy. Several times, the front wheels slid sideways into a ditch or an unforgiving rock. However, the vehicle was rugged and over-engineered – ideal for trips such as this. Pablo was completely used to this kind of driving. It was doubtful if he would be content with a smooth, wide, ice-free tarmacked road.

After fifteen miles and over an hour later, a small wooden chalet emerged through the driving snow. As they stepped out of the vehicle, the temperature drop was a shock to the system.

The chalet was extremely uninviting, mainly because the inside was as cold as the outside. Pablo immediately set to work, gathering logs and getting a fire going, but this did little to warm the three small

bedrooms. Jennifer and Larry took one room, Lloyd and Java the second and Pablo in the other. It was years since at least four of them had slept in bunk beds. It was also years since they'd had to sleep in their coats because of being so cold. It would have been an ideal opportunity for Lloyd and Java to share their accumulated knowledge and begin the bonding process. However, Java had far too much on his mind and Lloyd was too much in awe of Java to have a disclosing conversation.

At least some good news, the pantry was well stocked with food, so, the following morning, they all had a hearty breakfast.

It was now time for Lloyd to give his first set of instructions:

'Whatever clothes you've brought with you, trust me, they won't be adequate on their own. Put these high-tog base layers under them,' said Lloyd, holding up a thin black vest and a pair of leggings.

'It's come to this, has it? I've got to wear tights!' said Larry.

'You have a rucksack each. Inside you'll find a thermal drysuit complete with socks, gloves and a hood. You will have to put these on when we reach the cave. Please look after these items, they're hired. Also, there's a headtorch, knife and a drinks bottle. Anything else I've forgotten… Oh, yes, food.'

'Food?' asked Jennifer.

'Cereal bars.'

'Something tells me, this isn't going to be a walk in the park,' said Larry apprehensively.

'No, it isn't. I won't lie, there's a 25% chance that you will either die or suffer some serious injury on the way. So, if you want to back out, now is a good time to tell me,' warned Lloyd.

'Hang on, if there's a twenty-five-per-cent chance that one of us is going to die and there are four of us… That means one of us is definitely going to die,' said Jennifer using some kind of twisted logic.

'I don't know why we couldn't have just flown in,' grumbled Larry.

'The technology barrier!' snapped Jennifer, Java and Lloyd, together.

Java had never really thought about the dangers involved. It suddenly hit him like a heavy brick. He was being far too presumptuous to expect people so dear to him to risk their lives on his account.

'Look, this is unfair of me to put you through this – to put your lives in danger. You've got me here, that's the main thing. It's my problem from now on. I can go the rest of the way on my own,' said Java.

‘No chance!’ snapped Jennifer, ‘We’re accompanying you whether you like it or not!’

‘No, I insist, I’ll go on my own from here. You get back to my granddaughters, I’d never forgive myself if anything happened to their parents.’

‘He has a point, we do have Tegan and Caron to think about,’ said Larry, doing his best not to seem spineless.

‘Matter closed. We’re going with you – end of!’ growled Jennifer.

Lloyd hung on for a couple of minutes to allow the dust to settle. He needed their full attention – and commitment.

‘Pablo will take us as far as he can, hopefully to the base of the glacier, then we’re on our own. A three-mile hike up to the tunnel entrance, followed by another seven miles through the tunnel until we reach the kingdom,’ said Lloyd.

‘Ten miles? Be there by evening then?’ said Larry with misplaced optimism.

No one said anything, but drysuits and thermals had obviously been issued for a reason.

‘There’s one thing I couldn’t provide… I hope you’ve all brought suitable footwear.’

Lloyd looked down at their shoes. Jennifer and Java had the sense to wear hiking boots but Larry was wearing some sort of flimsy trainers. He shook his head in dismay.

After re-dressing themselves with the figure-hugging thermals underneath, Jennifer, Larry, Java and Lloyd left the relative cosiness of the chalet. Pablo was ready, waiting impatiently with the engine running. The extent of his services was dependent on the weather conditions which had considerably worsened overnight. The temperature had plummeted and there was no let-up in the blizzard. Drifting snow had covered most of the four-mile track up to the base of the glacier. Pablo was doubtful if his 4 x 4 would make it – after all, he had to get back.

Two miles from the glacier base, Pablo threw his hands up in the air, he had to call it a day.

‘No más… No further!’ he shouted, ‘Posarse, posarse!’

That was it then, all on foot from now on with Larry in his uncomfortable designer trainers.

12. Dragon blood

Jennifer, Larry and probably Lloyd, had never, in their entire lives, experienced anything so harsh and unpleasant. Java had, a long time ago, but then he was fit as a fiddle, now he was as fit as a couch potato. The horizontal freezing snow pelted their cheeks like buckshot. The extreme cold managed to penetrate the high-tech clothing, right down to their spinal cords. Every step forward was like wading through wet cement. Progress was extremely slow, mainly down to Larry's trainers which were about as much use as rubber nails. Five miles of this hell, they had to endure and then another seven miles through… well, they didn't know yet, hopefully, a nice warm tunnel.

It took them nearly an hour, following the snow-covered track, before they reached the base of the glacier. Then it got altogether more demanding. Some parts were relatively easy to traverse, but some parts were sheet ice and almost impossible to make any headway – especially in slippery trainers. The only way up in parts was on all fours. Apart from being exhausted, they were all hungry and thirsty, but there was no shelter where they could stop for a break. They were suffering from everything the extreme weather could throw at them. All feelings in their faces, fingers and toes had long since departed.

'This is absolutely no fun in this at all!' moaned Jennifer, but no one heard her for the howling wind.

Eventually, Lloyd made a sign to say, branch off the glacier, towards the rocks. They had completed two miles in three hours – some snails could move quicker. Hopefully, now at least, they could find shelter and have refreshments. This amounted to a chocolate bar and ice-cold water. They came across a small dip in the terrain, providing a margin of shelter and relief from the cruel winds. They gathered, huddled together and wondered what the hell they were doing.

'Look on the bright side, only another three miles to go until we reach the shelter of the tunnel,' said Lloyd optimistically.

After a couple of minutes, it was far too cold to linger, they set off

again. Lloyd led the way at a steady but slow pace. Jennifer followed, then Java with Larry falling behind at the rear. On other days, when the weather was calmer and the air clearer, they might have appreciated their spectacular vantage point, but there was no let-up in the stormy conditions. It was torturous, exhausting and seemingly never-ending, but it was something they knew they had to do. A couple of miles later, no one cared to look back but if they had, they would have seen Larry frozen on the spot. He didn't dare shout out, all he could do was stand perfectly still and stare helplessly at what appeared to be the biggest pussycat he'd ever seen in his life. Obviously, this was why Lloyd had issued him with a knife, but it was deep inside his zipped-up rucksack. The sweet, cuddly-looking cat belied her inner thoughts. She was eying up her polyester-coated dinner. It could equally have been a 'he' or a 'she', but in the heat of the moment, Larry thought female seemed more appropriate.

Eventually, Jennifer decided to turn around, mainly to see if her dad was keeping up, he was, plodding along behind her, but Larry was nowhere to be seen.

'Lloyd! We've lost Larry!' she yelled, so as to be heard above the wail of the storm.

They all backtracked, retracing their deep footsteps. They didn't have to go far before they spotted Larry standing as still as a statue and a large cat a few feet above him on a rocky outcrop, all ready to pounce. Immediately, Lloyd began throwing snowballs at the puma and cursing at it. The big cute cat had no intention of backing away, Larry was her dinner and she was going to eat him, end of. The cat growled and Lloyd and Jennifer growled. Meanwhile, Java had removed his knife from the rucksack. The cat was becoming tiresome, it was time to launch herself onto Larry. Just as she was flying through the air, Java tossed his knife. It embedded deeply in her neck. The puma uttered a loud painful howl and then dropped to the ground like a stone right next to Larry's designer trainers. Larry remained frozen to the spot for quite some time while the rest calmly discussed the incident.

'Not normally that big. The Puma or Cougar as sometimes known is native to these parts. Beautiful creature. Such a shame. Probably after food for her young,' said Lloyd, completely indifferent to Larry's near-death experience.

'Nice throwing, Dad!' praised Jennifer.

'Looks like I've still got it – after all these years. You ought to see me with a sword!' said Java as he removed the knife from the Puma's

neck and cleaned it in the snow.

‘Better get going, there could be more about. From now on, keep close together,’ instructed Lloyd.

It didn’t look like anyone was going to give Larry any sympathy. He had little choice but to get over the incident quickly and pull himself together. At least, he no longer needed to spend a penny.

‘I could have died there, horribly and painfully!’ bleated Larry.

‘Good job my dad’s handy with the knife then, isn’t it?’ Jennifer retorted.

The pungent scent of blood, puma blood, was now released covertly, but heavily into the air. Many hungry creatures, previously dozing in their rocky shelters, stirred from their slumber and were instinctively drawn into the open. A dozen or more foxes were first on the scene. The dead puma was barely enough for starters, now they wanted their main course. Foxes happened to be very cunning creatures. They would lie in wait and strike when they had the best advantage over their prey.

No longer was Larry lingering behind, he had learnt his lesson the hard way. In fact, now he took on a new position in the line – in front of Java. Any issues with the cold had now disappeared. They were all on the verge of overheating inside the thermal array of protective clothing. Larry didn’t like to mention the little incident he’d had within the layers of his clothing. After all, very little could be done about it. He would just have to bear an additional discomfort.

They cleared a rocky ridge and their first goal suddenly appeared in the far distance. Although a good half-mile away, the cave opening was highlighted by its contrasting surroundings. Rich green vegetation, trees and shrubs thrived in the warm outflow of the cave. The route now levelled out and became relatively easy to negotiate – even for Larry. In no time, the cave entrance was clearly in their sights, a couple of hundred metres, no more, but something caught their eyes.

‘Is it me or is there something moving on the rocks around the entrance?’ suggested Jennifer.

‘Could be condors, they tend to congregate around water. Mostly harmless,’ replied Lloyd calmly.

‘Don’t look like birds to me,’ fretted Larry.

‘They’re foxes, hungry ones at that,’ said Java casually.

Java was right, they were foxes. They had cunningly circumnavigated

around them and were lying in wait for their main course.

‘Well, we’re not going back now,’ snapped Jennifer.

‘I’m open to suggestions,’ said Lloyd.

‘I don’t think my knife skills are going to help this time. We can try fighting them off with sticks,’ suggested Java.

‘I have a horrible feeling that we’re going to go with that idea,’ said Larry with a gulp.

The odds were good… for the foxes: Eight hands, armed with sticks against twelve snarling mouths. On the plus side, there were plenty of suitable sticks available. They inched their way towards imminent danger. Puma-blood-stained mouths and sharp white fangs, dripping with saliva greeted them. It seemed that no one was prepared to make the first move, but one thing was for sure, the foxes were not going to miss out on their meal. Then all hell broke loose. Intuitively, all the foxes pounced together. The sticks were quite effective, if they could get a good swing at them. A good blow to the head dazed them enough for them to retreat. The problem was aiming right. Naturally, Java was skilled at this kind of thing. He was, used to be, an accomplished swordsman, but Jennifer, Lloyd and Larry were bordering on useless.

‘Keep them away from your legs,’ yelled Java.

One by one, Java took them out with his sticks until finally there were just three foxes left standing. They were bigger and faster than the rest and all concentrating on Java. He was outmatched.

‘A little help wouldn’t go amiss,’ shouted Java.

Java’s cry for help fell on deaf ears mainly because Lloyd, Jennifer and Larry had spotted something Java had not. No longer were there just three foxes remaining, they were now surrounded by a much larger skulk of foxes – perhaps a hundred or more. Reinforcements had arrived, but not for the humans. Jennifer, Lloyd and Larry were now beginning to wonder how painful it was to be eaten alive.

‘Oh well, I suppose there must be worse ways to die,’ said Larry, with anomalous braveness.

‘Name one!’ screamed Jennifer.

Regardless of all this whimpering, Java continued to battle with the other foxes. However, it was inevitable, one of the foxes had an opportunity and went for Java’s bare wrist. Blood immediately began to flow down his hand and drip on the floor.

Then, the strangest of things happened. The foxes suddenly stopped attacking and were inwardly drawn to lick the small pool of blood on the floor. Almost in anticipation, the three foxes remained still for a few seconds, waiting in terror, waiting for something they instinctively knew would happen – and it did. Every fox felt their pain. The intense scream of pure agony reverberated around the mountains, causing avalanches and making other animals retreat into their burrows.

Suddenly, unquenchable flames flared out of their mouths and nostrils. From within, they were on fire. The agony of being burnt from the inside out was unimaginable – even for a fox. The other foxes had no desire to hang around.

'That's just how I feel after a vindaloo,' said Larry.

'What just happened?' asked Jennifer, dumbfounded.

'Dragon blood,' said Lloyd.

'What, from my dad?' snapped Jennifer.

'Don't look at me, I'm no wiser than you!' said Java.

At last, they'd reached a place where they could take a rest and have another cereal bar. The entrance to the cave was almost a sanctuary amidst the wildness of the mountains. They sat on grassy banks on either side of the briskly flowing stream emerging from the cave. Jennifer and Larry sat on one side and Lloyd and Java on the other. It was a chance to recover, take refreshments and in the fullness of time, change into their drysuits. The stream seemed to have a life of its own, playfully splashing onto the nearby rocks and occasionally erupting into effervescence, just like the effects of a bath bomb.

'There, did you see that? Looks like trapped gas somewhere,' said Larry, now surprisingly calm after the ordeal of the climb, the big cat and the foxes.

'Oh yes, it's so beautiful up here,' said Jennifer.

'I was just thinking… I was calling your dad a senile geriatric, a couple of weeks ago,' said Larry, humbly.

'To be honest, I'm a little overawed with him, myself,' said Jennifer proudly.

'Do you think he's… you know, like us? Lightning shooting out of his finger, bleeding dragon blood, fighting off all those foxes? He's double our age and I could hardly keep up with him.'

'What, you're saying he's not human? Well, that means I'm not human

then. I am his daughter, you know,' Jennifer retorted.

'Lloyd keeps calling him sir and lord but he barely knows him. It's all very strange.'

On the other side of the stream, an equally loaded conversation was taking place.

'Well, you seem to know all about me, I take it you're a little more than just my daughter's neighbour?' suggested Java calmly.

'I'm your guide, little more than that really,' said Lloyd.

'You've been to the kingdom then?'

'No, this will be my first time.'

'You've never been in this cave before, then?'

'No, but I've done a bit of potholing in my time… Look, all that matters is that the Protectorate have chosen me as your guide. Hopefully, with my knowledge, we will get into the kingdom without too many mishaps. That's all I can say… Shall we put our drysuits on?' suggested Lloyd, somewhat curtly.

13. Light sabre

As to be expected, the cave was pitch black, wet and inhospitable. Clearly, there was more misery to come. After a few hundred metres of scrambling along wet slippery rocks, daylight no longer penetrated the cave. They were now guided solely by the pool of light from their head torches. They could barely stand up and often had to crawl, uncomfortably, under low-hanging rocks. It was hell in a different guise. They thought the bleak, icy mountain climb was bad enough, but this was no improvement. At least now they didn't have to contend with freezing temperatures, but that was hardly a blessing. To add to the unpleasantness, there was an overpowering stench apparently coming from the fast-flowing stream.

'What's that awful smell, it's like we're in a sewer?' asked Larry.

'We are! This is, for want of a better description, the kingdom's main sewage outlet,' explained Lloyd.

'You are joking! Please tell me you're joking,' screamed Jennifer.

'Just don't swallow any of it,' cautioned Lloyd.

If they had been told they were going to have to crawl, swim and wade through five miles of sewage, at least two of the party may well have stayed at home. Soon, they came to a section where the cave walls considerably narrowed. They were forced to wade, knee-deep, through the stinking water. Gradually, the water became deeper and deeper until eventually, it was up to their chests. For Jennifer, up to her shoulders – she was shorter than the rest. It was very slow going, but there was one blessing, they all became nose-blind to the stench of the water.

'Well, at least we haven't got to worry about big cats and foxes,' said Larry.

They all wished he hadn't said that and true to their fears, Jennifer was the first to scream.

'Argh! Something is wrapping around my legs!'

'Stand still! Any movement, it will tighten its grip!' shouted Lloyd.

‘What the hell is IT?’ screamed Jennifer, even louder.

Apparently, Lloyd’s training/briefing had encompassed the possibility of encountering such creatures – not that he knew what they were or how big and how dangerous they were. It was inevitable that such creatures would exist, it was, after all, the effluent of a magical kingdom. The stream contained an abundance of compounds and organic substances not found in the normal world. In other words, it was a magical soup. Over the centuries, this soup had spawned many unique life forms which could only exist in the outflow of the kingdom. As soon as these creatures ventured into the normal world, they fizzled away into no more than carbon dioxide and a few other harmless gasses.

‘I *think* they’re harmless, just curious,’ said Lloyd, doubtfully.

Even though Jennifer remained as still as a statue, the creature was refusing to let go. In fact, Jennifer had no choice but to stand still, her legs were now, well and truly bound. Once again it was a hungry creature and its meal was going nowhere. It was now time for the creature to examine what it had caught and was about to eat. Its head slowly popped out of the water. It was about the size of a grapefruit with four eyes across the top and black fangs on either side of its huge mouth. It almost looked pleased with itself on such a big catch.

Jennifer increased the intensity of her scream as the hideous head, followed by its tentacled, slimy body, began to wrap around her neck. Fortunately, Java was at hand with his knife – again. Moments later, the creature’s head was cleanly detached from its body. Both parts fell into the water.

‘It’s a clam worm and by the looks of it, a baby one at that,’ said Lloyd knowledgeably. ‘Obviously mutated to that size with all the chemicals in the stream. Normally, no more than six inches long, and completely harmless.’

Jennifer couldn’t say anything for the moment, she was trembling far too much for her mouth to work. Suddenly, the activity in the water increased.

‘I think we best hurry through this section. It looks like the cave opens up further on,’ suggested Lloyd.

‘Take large strides then they won’t have a chance to wrap around your legs,’ suggested Java.

They had to wade another fifty metres, through the highly animated water before they could climb out onto the rocky ledge. They all took it in turns to scream or shout out as the creatures brushed past their

legs with their small tentacles. Keeping their legs moving and mostly apart seem to be effective. Unfortunately, one creature managed to obstruct Java's path, he tripped, lost his balance and promptly submerged beneath the surface. Instantly, the horror of the moment firmly took hold.

'Dad! Dad! He's gone under!' screamed Jennifer.

'There's nothing we can do. Keep going! yelled Lloyd.

'We have to help him!' cried Jennifer.

'Have more faith in your father,' said Lloyd.

Jennifer, Larry and Lloyd managed to reach the wide part of the cave. They clambered out of the water and caught their breath on a rocky ledge.

'No, no, it can't end like this! This is not how my dad should die, not here! This isn't right,' cried Jennifer.

'Your father is a lot more capable than you think,' said Lloyd, calmly.

Jennifer was just about to scream at Lloyd when suddenly, her father burst out of the water with several severed bits of the creature, still wrapped around his legs.

'Appreciate a hand?!' he shouted as he spat the foul water from his mouth.

Larry and Lloyd pulled him onto the ledge and uncoiled several slimy tentacle-covered bits of the creature, from his limbs. Naturally, Java was shaking with fear and exhaustion. He knew that was *probably,* the closest he had ever come to death.

'That was a bit intense! I'll tell you something else, the water tastes bloody awful,' said Java light-heartedly.

Jennifer gave her dad a tight hug whilst Lloyd gave him some fresh water out of the flask. Larry was preoccupied keeping clear of the infested water on the narrow ridge.

'You were under the water for that long. I thought I'd…' there was no need for Jennifer to finish her sentence.

'I hope you didn't write me off that quickly! It'll take more than a few baby clam worms to do that,' said Java as he casually picked up his knife, reached over his shoulder and stabbed an enormous clam worm in what was assumed to be its forehead.

From its size, it was most likely the mother of all the little annoying clam worm creatures. The nightmarish creature lay dead on the rocky

ledge with Java's knife buried deep in its pumpkin-sized head

'How the heck??' screamed Jennifer.

'Fortunately, I saw its reflection in the water flask. It was slinking up behind me,' said Java, casually.

'Dad, you're something else,' said Jennifer.

'I tend to agree. Well, at least things can't get any worse,' said Larry, now rested.

'Larry, will you shut up!' snapped Jennifer.

Scrambling along a narrow rock ledge like monkeys in the harsh light of their head-torches was much preferred than wading through the toxic water. Every so often, a clam worm creature would emerge from the murky water and snap at the party, but now they were all armed with knives and would use them at the drop of a hat. The ledge was so slippery that it took all their effort to stay on it. Many times, they lost their footing, occasionally slipping into the water, but they were out far too spritely for any creature to grab hold.

The cave eventually opened up into a huge cavern, practically the size of a cathedral. Faint glimmers of light entered through fissures in the rock high above them. Presumably, these fissures lead all the way to the mountain surface many hundreds of meters above them. There was enough available light for them to switch off their head torches and conserve the batteries. That really would be disastrous with no light source. The stream made a deceptively pleasant trickling sound as it steadily meandered across the cavern through the uneven hard rock floor.

'This place is unreal. If they're after the eighth wonder of the world, this place has got to be it,' said Larry.

'Is it me, or do the walls seem to be shimmering?' said Jennifer, hesitantly.

'It'll probably be condensation trickling down the walls,' replied Lloyd calmly.

As they talked, their voices reverberated around the huge cavern. Larry couldn't help himself and shouted, 'echo'. Predictable, he got an echo back – and then much more.

A frantic buzzing sound suddenly began.

It emanated not just from one area but all corners of the cavern, high above them and all around them. The disturbing sound steadily grew in intensity until it was almost too much to bear. At first, they saw

nothing, perhaps a fuzziness high above them, but nothing they could positively make out. The fuzziness thickened into a cloud of greyish haze and then the source of the noise was chillingly revealed.

'What the?' screamed Jennifer.

'Dragonflies, looks like a giant mutation of the meganeura species, an exceptionally cunning insect,' shouted Lloyd over the terrifying din.

'They're only insects then? They'll probably just fly around, pester us for a while and then fly off,' suggested Larry with misplaced calmness.

'Dragonflies are carnivores and at that size, we're a tempting snack,' said Lloyd.

'Well, thanks for that Lloyd, I feel much better now,' said Jennifer.

'I sense a recurring theme here. We seem to be in high demand to be eaten,' concluded Larry.

'We have to get over to that recess in the cavern wall; they'll only be able to attack us from one direction,' said Java wisely.

They scrambled, slipping and sliding over to the rock face towards the small recess and packed themselves in like sardines. Java truly wished he had one of his swords – that would have made mincemeat of many of the creatures, but all he had was his knife. They were trapped and bombarded by huge flying dragonflies. It really seemed to be an inescapable situation.

They were exactly like the blue-green variety that innocently hovered over Jennifer's garden pond back home: A long stick-like body with long narrow, see-through wings and two huge bulging eyes. However, these were the size of ostriches and far more menacing. They dived recklessly towards them, averting a collision with the hard rock face at the last possible moment.

'I'm open to suggestions,' said Java, now recognised as the chief slayer of unusual creatures.

What could anyone suggest? There were well and truly in a tight spot, with no weapons and no hope. Larry pointlessly began fiddling nervously with his headtorch, Jennifer was entranced with their enormous, hypnotic eyes, as big as goldfish bowls.

'I'm sure they're undressing me with those horrible monster eyes,' said Jennifer.

'No doubt working out how much juicy flesh is on your bones,' said Java.

'Dad, that's not helping!' snapped Jennifer.

‘Their enormous eyes, no doubt, help them to cope with the poor light in this cavern,’ analysed Lloyd calmly.

Larry suddenly realised the significance of what he was nervously fiddling with. He had something very appropriate to say, ‘With those enormous eyes, I bet they’re easily blinded, and it so happens that we have the means to blind them!’

He demonstrated by zooming the beams on the head-torches down to a pinpoint of light.

Larry was right, it turned out they had four very effective weapons – almost like lightsabres. On the zoom setting, the beams from the torches formed narrow pencil beams. The trick was to aim the beams directly at the dragonfly’s huge eyes. With an absence of eyelids, the extreme brightness temporarily blinded them long enough for them to collide, heavily into the rock walls of the cavern. Yes, they were in a terrifying predicament, but that aside, it was a wholly satisfying experience. Apart from the absence of the classic Nnnnnnnnn humming noise, they all behaved as though they were Jedi Warriors. In reality, though, there were many thousands of dragonflies, far too many to win the battle. The best strategy was to group together and head towards the exit of the cavern where complete darkness would hopefully discourage them from following.

Naturally, Java was the most skilled, but they were all on a fast learning curve. One or two dragonflies managed to slip through the lightsabre blockade and take a few nibbles of tasty humans. Unfortunately for the dragonflies, the rubberised drysuits soured the taste somewhat. Inch by inch, they edged their way towards the exit. Hundreds of the enormous insects lay dazed on the floor of the cavern, but thousands were still relentlessly attacking with incredible accuracy. Miraculously, they finally made it to the narrow exit of the cavern. After a few metres in, total darkness returned and the dragonflies instinctively called it a day.

Everyone was buzzing with excitement, even easy-going Java. The terrifying experience put aside, it had almost been fun

‘That was quite satisfying,’ said Larry.

‘A brilliant idea, sweetheart,’ said Jennifer

‘Yes, well done Larry. I must admit, I thought we were done for, there,’ said Java.

‘We have to check our wounds, see if any bites have penetrated our drysuits. That particular species of dragonfly may well have poisonous saliva,’ said Lloyd knowledgeably.

14. Java's instincts

Now, back in a narrow, pitch-dark tunnel, they restored their head-torch beams to normal and continued steadily forwards into the grim unknown. They hoped that they were now clear of unearthly, flesh-eating creatures, but there was still a long way to go. Their progress was taking much longer than planned. There was a good reason for this: Pumas, foxes, giant clam worms and giant dragonflies had got in their way – and tried to eat them. Lloyd knew of only one creature that could top that lot but he had every confidence that they wouldn't be that unfortunate.

As it happened, Lloyd had been unfortunate. He had been badly bitten by one of the giant dragonflies. The wound was festering and nothing they were carrying in the small first-aid box, was helping. They managed to scramble along the narrow ledge, next to the stream, for further a mile or so, but Lloyd was in a bad way. He tried his best not to slow down the pace, but he had all the signs of a high fever.

'It's no good, you go on. I'll rest a bit and catch you up,' said Lloyd, clearly in discomfort.

'That's not happening,' said Java, 'What's your pain threshold like?'

'Reasonable I suppose, why?' asked Lloyd.

'I think I may be able to treat your wound. Do you mind if I try?'

Java didn't wait for an answer. Moments later, Jennifer had taken the initiative and unzipped the top of his dry suit to expose the dragonfly bite. It was a worrying sight, a large open wound with yellowy-green puss, oozing out. Java took his knife out of the rucksack. Lloyd recoiled in trepidation. He may have had a high pain threshold, but he wasn't prepared to be sliced open. To Lloyd's relief but then shock, Java swiftly sliced the palm of his hand. Blood immediately began to flow from the cut.

'Hold him down, both of you. Sorry friend, I think this is going to sting a little bit,' cautioned Java.

Hesitantly, he placed the palm of his hand firmly on Lloyd's wound.

Java's blood flowed abundantly into the festered bite. Lloyd screamed out in pain, but this was just the beginning, the healing effect had yet to kick in. After a moment or two, the wound began to effuse in smoke and then spontaneously burst into flames. For an agonising minute or so, the fire burnt away at the festering wound and then suddenly fizzled out. The infection had gone, burnt away, but now there was a large horrendous third-degree flesh burn on Lloyd's shoulder.

'Oh well, that'll be my first battle scar,' said Lloyd, stoically fighting the excruciating pain.

'Wait!' said Java sternly.

Before everybody's eyes, the area of severely burnt flesh began to shrink. It was a slow process, but after a few minutes, the injury had all but disappeared. A few more minutes later, Lloyd was completely recovered and fighting fit.

'That was just… remarkable. Did that really happen? How did you do that?' puzzled Larry, becoming more and more bewildered with Java's amazing talents.

'I have no idea, just following my instincts,' said Java.

'I have no complaints,' said Lloyd, zipping up his drysuit.

Now healed and briefly rested, they battled on. After a further half a mile of awkward scrambling, slipping and crawling, Jennifer was forced to make another observation.

'Is it me or are these walls glowing green?'

No one liked it when Jennifer made an observation.

Everyone turned their lights off. The rock walls were not only glowing green but subtly moving. Not shimmering this time, more like pulsating. For some reason, Larry foolishly touched the rock. Immediately, dozens of green tendrils wrapped tightly around his fingers. He snatched his hand away in shock, tearing a chunk of the moss off the rock. Even though detached from the wall, the moss continued to tighten its grip on its prey – on Larry's delicate fingers.

'Ah! It's crushing my fingers,' he screamed.

This time, Jennifer and her knife came to the rescue, cutting the many tendrils until finally, Larry's fingers were free.

'Interesting, luminescent animated moss. I've heard about it, but never, for one moment, believed it existed. Ordinary moss has mutated into something that can snare its prey,' said Lloyd like a true

naturalist.

‘And inflict pain!’ added Larry.

Then regrettably, they noticed that further on, the moving moss was also bonded to the rock ledge. Only one thing for it, they had to get into the perilous water.

‘So, summing this up as briefly as I possibly can: We're going to wade through highly toxic sewage water, most likely containing giant killer worms with killer moss on either side of us, in pitch dark. Your average sort of day really,’ said Larry as he lowered himself into the water.

‘Stop moaning, it’ll be something to tell our grandchildren… Lloyd, what’s all crunchy under my feet?’ asked Jennifer apprehensively.

‘It will be the skeletal remains after the moss has devoured the flesh of its prey, I should imagine.’

‘Remains of what prey?’ asked Jennifer innocently.

‘Ah, I was hoping you weren’t going to ask me that,’ said Lloyd.

For some time, they waded, often waist-deep, along the fast-flowing stream. Then, suddenly, the luminescent killer moss came to an abrupt end and so did the crunchiness under their feet. The tunnel now opened up considerably into another cavern, much smaller, this time. They climbed out of the murky water with premature sighs of relief. The rocky ledges were no longer covered in killer moss, instead, they were now covered in something equally unsettling. Their feet sunk deeply into a soft carpet of stinking, slimy matter.

‘Lloyd, what are we treading in?’ asked Larry, hesitantly.

Lloyd didn’t answer, he didn’t have to. Moments later, they saw exactly, whose bones they had been crunching underfoot and whose slimy, stinking excrement they were now ankle-deep in. It was bats, thousands of them.

It has to be said, there were an awful lot of giant dragonflies, but their numbers now paled into insignificance. So many bats dashed about before them that they formed a solid animated blackness in the harsh light of their head-torches. Easily, several million, not giant in any way, just normal-looking bats. However, feeding off the effluents of a magical dragon kingdom, they were hardly going to be just normal. They formed an impenetrable cloud of flesh-eating terror. Although not exactly vampire bats, they were equally as terrifying – a solid mass of very hungry flesh devourers. Once again, something else wanted to eat them, but this was on an unprecedented scale.

‘I was hoping we were going to be spared from these creatures. They really are bad news – a mutated species of microbats. They need to eat twice their body weight every day, hence, they are nearly always hungry. They can strip a cow down to its bare skeleton in minutes. If needs be, they even eat each other,’ said Lloyd.

‘Just what we needed to know. Thanks for that Lloyd. Basically, we’re doomed then?’ concluded Larry.

‘That’s it then, we’ll have to go back,’ said Jennifer, tearfully.

‘Just a thought, if we had dog whistles, we could use them to confuse the bat’s echolocating,’ suggested Larry.

‘Hang on, let me check… No, no, it doesn’t look like I’ve brought my dog whistle, how stupid of me!’ fumed Jennifer.

‘There is a possible way through this. Not a particularly pleasant one, but as I see it, it’s the only shot we’ve got,’ said Java.

‘Tell us then, don’t keep us in suspense!’ snapped Jennifer.

‘We have to make our way along the stream but completely submerged – surfacing for air as little as possible,’ explained Java.

‘What, in that toxic sewer with our heads underwater?’ Larry whimpered.

‘To sum it up then: face in sewage or return to flesh-eating moss, giant dragonflies, giant worms, foxes and big cats. I think I know which direction I’m going,’ said Lloyd.

Java was the first to climb into the water and submerge himself below the surface, he had already been initiated to this unpleasant experience. It took a while, but eventually, after several deep breaths, Larry, Jennifer and Lloyd dunked their head into the foul water and began blindly following Java. Slowly, they crawled along the bottom of the stream on all fours with their eyes tightly shut. They had a long way to go.

By now, the bats had picked up the human scent and were swarming above them in their thousands – possibly millions. They began to bombard their backpacks which were unavoidably above the waterline. Fortunately, Java had correctly deduced that water, especially sewage water, was a no-go area for bats. As soon as they surfaced for air, the bats instantly attempted to congregate on their faces – bites were inevitable. It was pointless screaming underwater, besides, screaming was a waste of air. It was possibly the most unpleasant thing any of them had ever done. They had to crawl along the stream for at least a couple of hundred metres – it was going to

take a while.

At long last, Java took a risk and surfaced. To his delight, he was finally clear of the bats. More good news, he was convinced he could see a glint of orange at the end of the tunnel. It could only be one thing, it had to be the glow from the setting sun.

The others surfaced, choked and coughed for a good five minutes and then examined each other's face cuts and bites. There was little they could do to treat the wounds. Fresh water was in short supply and they had only brought a small packet of plasters with them. Whinging aside, only Java had noticed the faint orange glow.

'Noticed anything, folks?' said Java brightly.

'Yes, our faces are all covered in festering wounds and we will most likely go down with some kind of plague,' bleated Larry.

Java had a quick look at everyone's faces, not that he professed to be a doctor or anything.

'They're not serious, just scratches. I think we got off lightly there… Turn your head-torches off.'

They reluctantly did as he asked.

'Now, is it me or is that an orange glow? Orange as in sunset? I do believe we're nearing the end of the tunnel!' said Java encouragingly.

15. Starlight

By the time they'd reached the tunnel exit, night had fallen. A more acceptable darkness, with a smattering of twinkling stars, greeted them. It had taken them all day and an evening to cover the twelve miles from where Pablo dropped them off, to the outer perimeter of the Marutuk Kingdom. It worked out at less than a mile an hour, but they had good reasons why it had taken them so long – they had been in high demand to be eaten. Then, of course, there were the freezing temperatures, the toxic stream and the pitch-dark tunnels. How they all longed for a little warm sunshine, but they would just have to wait until morning. The journey had certainly taken its toll on the not-so-experienced explorers. Apart from being exhausted, bruised and battered, they were filthy and stank to high heaven. One consolation, they were warm inside their thermal base layers and thermal drysuits.

The small opening of the cave emerged on the outer edge of the kingdom. Java was eager to venture on towards his old haunts of many decades ago but now was not the time. He needed rest – they all needed rest and it was the darkest of nights. Several cereal bars were consumed and nearby snow was melted and used to quench their thirsts. They would stay put until daylight when the warmth of the sun returned.

Java was a little troubled by the presence of snow. As far as he remembered, there was never any snow in the kingdom. The dragons always put pay to that. No matter, he would postpone his concerns until morning. Right now, on the soft grass, in his warm drysuit, all he wanted to do was sleep.

Now fed and quenched, they all huddled together, some distance from the cave opening, just in case any of the flesh-eating creatures, decided to venture out. Naturally, they all had their knives constantly by their side.

16. Odela's confession

The new morning brought daylight, but it didn't bring warmth. The kingdom was frozen. It was not how it was supposed to be: No life, no movement, everything covered in snow, everything iced up. The only movement they did see was six enormous hot air balloons coming over the high mountain range, in the far distance. Each balloon displayed an enormous red 'T' on the white fabric.

'Transtell!' said Jennifer alarmingly.

No one asked her to elucidate, they had all heard of the Transtell media giant. Apparently, the ruthless company had found a way around the technology barrier.

'This is all wrong, the kingdom should be warm and pleasant. This time of the year the magnolia trees should be in full bloom, poppies should be in abundance and newborn lambs should be filling the fields,' said Java.

It *was* all wrong. Everywhere was covered in snow and there was no sign of life. All the trees and shrubs had gone and the fields were empty of cattle and produce. If this wasn't bad enough, the kingdom was about to be invaded and then exposed to the world by an evil, over-zealous, media giant.

'We have to find Rosh, my brother, this is not as it should be. He should be controlling the dragons,' fretted Java.

The magnificent white marble castle was some distance away but it still dominated the landscape. It was exactly how Java remembered it, magical, foreboding and extravagant. Overshadowing the idyllic kingdom was its purpose and that's exactly what it had always done, even now. This was the most logical place to look for his brother.

After so many years, it was reasonable to assume that King Worgin (Java's and Rosh's father), had long since deceased. As is the eternal way of things in the kingdom of dragons, Rosh, being the first-born twin, would have become King. As king, he should have inherited his father's magic and powers, which included complete control over the dragons.

It was at least two miles to the castle. They had no time to waste. The hot air balloons were already descending. Soon, many people with cameras, video cameras and weapons, no doubt, would be spilling out of the baskets to wreak unwelcomed havoc on the peaceful realm.

A slow walking pace was the only option. Larry was out of condition, Lloyd had trouble with his knees and Jennifer had blisters on her toes. Only Java was fit enough to run, but it was unwise to split up. This was another mystery for everyone, more so, Java. Not so long ago he was classed as a geriatric. He had difficulty getting out of a chair, even tying his own shoelaces. Now, he was a one-man army, as agile as an Olympian. He could shoot bolts of lightning out of his fingers, his blood had magical properties and he could fight monsters underwater. Something unexplainable was happening to him.

Shortly, they approached the outer edge of the town. This far out, the town consisted exclusively of small stone houses with thatched roofs. They were erected in a neat formation, along gently winding cobbled streets. It was too far out from the centre for such things as shops, bakeries and blacksmiths. This was where the youngest members of the kingdom lived. The older the people were, the closer to the centre they lived. It was a sensible arrangement but involved an awful lot of moving houses throughout their lives. The streets were deserted apart from a young teenage boy dragging a small log behind him.

‘Hello there,’ said Java, in ancient Welsh. It was a language he would never forget.

‘It’s my log, I found it!’ growled the boy.

‘I don’t want your log. I just wondered… where is everybody?’ asked Java.

The boy looked at him as though he was stupid. Surely, he knew that everyone was in their homes, under several blankets, trying to keep warm. The boy had never seen a stranger – a visitor, he had no concept of such a thing. The kingdom was all that he knew, apart from the Netherworld and only devils and demons lived there.

‘Aren’t you cold?’ asked the boy, noticing the strange figure-hugging clothes, the strangers were wearing. ‘I’m going to try and burn this log at my grandmother's. I’m sure she would welcome you and your friends to come and share the fire.’

Java thanked the boy and followed him down several streets, getting ever closer to the centre of the town. Eventually, they arrived at a small stone-built house just like all the others. Everyone piled in and filled the cramped living room. Immediately noticeable was the complete lack of furniture apart from a rickety rocking chair with an

old lady squeezed in it. She was shivering under several sheepskin blankets. The inside of the room was just as icy cold as the outside.

‘This is my Gran, her name is Odela. Gran, I’ve said these people could share the heat from this log – if I can get it to burn,’ said the boy.

Odela said nothing but gave her grandson one of her annoyed looks. The boy placed the log in the fireplace and immediately set to work, trying to set light to the log with the flame of a candle. It was a feeble attempt, the log was too damp and the candle’s flame far too weak. Larry had a go but he should have known better. Meanwhile, Java knelt down and spoke to the old lady.

‘Could you tell me what’s happened here? What’s happened to the kingdom?’ asked Java in a clear, precise voice, thinking she might be deaf.

Odela stared at him. At first, Java thought it was because he’d asked a couple of stupid questions, but then he realised, she was staring at the scar on his forehead.

‘No, you can’t be… Java?’

‘Yes, yes, you remember me?’

‘But you were banished into the Netherworld. You are the son of the King,’ she grabbed hold of Java’s arm and violently pulled him towards her. ‘Have you come to save the kingdom?’ she asked sternly.

‘I don’t know, I need to know what’s happened?’

‘Who are these people, I have no food to give you!’ snapped Odela.

‘We don’t want your food, perhaps you’d like a cereal bar?’

Java took a couple of bars from his backpack.

‘This is my daughter, Jennifer, and her husband Larry, and this is Lloyd, our guide,’

For a couple of minutes, neither the boy nor Odela said anything, they were preoccupied with devouring the raisin-filled cereal bars. This gave time for Odela to think.

‘You… you had a child… in the Netherworld?!’ niggled Odela.

‘Yes, twin girls. There are good people as well as bad, beyond the mountains. Now tell me, why is the kingdom frozen?’ asked Java again.

Odela paused for a moment while she took several shallow breaths. Tears began to form.

‘It’s all my fault, every bit of it, my fault!’ Odela put her face in her hands and began to wail as very old ladies can be known to do.

Speaking in Welsh, Jennifer hadn’t a clue what she was saying, but even so, she did her best to console her.

The old woman pushed Jennifer away and then calmed herself. It was something she had never told anyone before, but now it was time to reveal her terrible mistake – her incompetence that had troubled her all her life.

‘Your father, the King, died a year ago and your brother Rosh, became the rightful King. The coronation followed. All went well up until the point when he blew the magic horn. Everyone waited for the dragons to appear and perform their flying display as they have always done for centuries on such occasions. This time, however, the dragons didn’t respond. He blew the horn again, but still no response. Again and again, he blew the horn. All that day and all night he blew that bothersome horn and still, they remained in their caves. They ignored the King. To this day, not a single dragon has left their cave. Without the dragons, without their fiery breath, the kingdom has quickly become frozen. Without the King’s magic, illnesses have returned, clouds have shielded the sun and the women have become barren,’ explained Odela.

‘I don’t understand. Why should the dragons ignore the horn?’ asked a puzzled Java.

‘Because the firstborn didn’t blow it, you numbskull!’ snapped Odela.

‘But that must mean that…’

‘Yes, you are the firstborn! I’m ashamed to say that I am the midwife who got you two mixed up.’

It explained a lot – an awful lot, but there was no point in Java getting angry with her. It was, after all, just one of those things. A simple mistake made by a stupid, thoughtless, incompetent, scatter-brained old hag. Alright, perhaps he was a little bit annoyed. Admittedly, the consequences of such gross incompetence were far-reaching, but on the plus side, Java had had a varied and interesting life. He had seen the modern Netherworld in all its guises and through it all, he’d had a loving wife and was blessed with children and grandchildren. However, there was one matter that had been deeply anguishing. He reached into his pocket and felt the pouch containing the small lock of hair.

‘Well, in that case, I better start as I mean to go on,’ said Java,

cheerily.

Now, there was no particular reason for Java to hide his powers. He motioned the boy and Larry to move away from the fireplace and then pointed his finger at the damp log in the hearth. With a loud crack and roar, an intense bolt of lightning shot out of his finger and hit the log. It instantly burst into a vigorous fire. For the first time in a long while, the small room soon became warm and inviting.

‘We better get to the castle,’ said Java – in English.

17. Transtell

The first of the six hot-air balloons clumsily touched down on the kingdom's equivalent of a football ground. As to be expected, some kind of ball sport was played in the Kingdom of Marutuk, but not necessarily soccer. Hot air balloons were a cunning way of bypassing the technology barrier, but with such unsophisticated air transport, the wind direction and speed had to be precise. Because of these requirements, the *invaders* were forced to wait several days before the weather conditions were just right. Naturally, this was very irritating for all concerned.

Getting past the border patrol guarding the military-imposed no-fly-zone, was another hurdle to negotiate. However, never underestimate the power of the press. A little bit of coercion and blackmail, targeted at a specific high-ranking major-general, was all it took.

Before they settled on using hot air balloons, they'd tried other ways: Gliders – they failed to glide and crashed. Parachuting in from several miles up – they drifted off course. They even considered getting there on foot again, as the commandos had done previously. Naturally, this was discouraged because of almost certainly getting killed.

Conard Wurtherly, the owner of Transtell media giant, was in the basket of the first and most elaborate balloon. As he had invested an awful lot of money into this unique venture, it was only right that he came along to oversee the progress of the operation. Certain important things should be known about Wurtherly. Basically, he was ruthless, greedy, corrupt and callous with no redeemable qualities whatsoever.

He was precisely what Java would class as a demon of the Netherworld.

The instant that the basket of the first balloon brushed, clumsily against the ground, all but Wurtherly jumped out. Of course, this was a silly thing to do. With much less weight, the balloon immediately began to rise. After a bout of furious ranting, Wurtherly tossed out a tethered rope for the men to pull the balloon down. A steel anchor was hastily hammered into the ground and the rope attached. The

other five balloons proceeded to make equally unsteady and unprofessional landings nearby. In a matter of a few minutes, six enormous hot air balloons were strewn across the football ground. It was a very unusual sight for the kingdom. The bright red 'T' (T for Transtell) logo was plastered across each of the white balloons, removing any doubt as to who owned them. The people of the kingdom were too cold to venture outside and witness the extraordinary goings-on. This gave Wurtherly's men pretty much free run of the place. A total of forty men, dressed in pea-green high-visibility suits, with a red 'T' insignia on the breast pocket, gathered and listened to Wurtherly's instructions. He had to shout – for some reason, the megaphone didn't work.

'We need irrefutable evidence that this god-forsaken place exists. Remember, snap, snap, snap, we need as many photographs as possible. Just in case there are problems with digital technology, you have been issued with old-style, film cameras. Also, gather as many artefacts as possible. We will also require one or two peasants to take back with us, preferably healthy ones. Sedate them if necessary. OK, get to it, I don't plan on staying here overnight,' said Wurtherly assertively and heartlessly.

As had been proved previously with the troublesome SD memory card, digital technology did appear to work within the kingdom. The only explanation for this was that the technology barrier wasn't all that effective on small items. A concern for the Protectorate was that there were other small things which could have far more of an impact on a relatively peaceful ancient kingdom, than cameras.

18. Reunions

‘Come on then, don’t keep it all to yourself!’ said Jennifer enthusiastically.

Before Java could answer, Lloyd spoke for him.

‘It turns out that your father is the firstborn and the rightful King of Marutuk, not Rosh, your uncle. He has no magical powers over the dragons or the kingdom. That’s why this place is in such a state,’ said Lloyd, informatively.

‘You understand Welsh?’ queried Java, somewhat surprised.

‘That was the worst part of the training to be your guide – learning to speak Welsh. It has to be the hardest language there is, to learn,’ grumbled Lloyd.

Java, Jennifer, Larry and Lloyd, trudged as quickly as they could, through the slushy, muddy streets. Every pretty little stone house they walked past, had iced-up windows. No one, it seemed, had managed to get a fire going. Of course, there was a good reason for this – there was little or no wood left in the kingdom to burn. All the trees had been felled, even the shrubs had gone. In fact, anything that would burn had been burnt to warm the people. Now there were only two smoking chimneys in the whole kingdom and Odela’s was one of them. The only thing the people of the kingdom could do to attempt to keep warm was to wrap themselves up in blankets or sheepskins. To add to their misery, there was no food left, either. The crops had failed and the cattle and sheep had stopped breeding. Slowly but surely, the kingdom was dying, all because of Odela’s mistake.

Only one person could save the kingdom now and that was Java.

Finally, they reached the foreboding and extravagant castle. The drawbridge was down and the royal guards were nowhere to be seen. It was far too cold for them to stand around all day. Clearly, they had all gone home to bury themselves under blankets.

Java led the way. It was a long time since he had walked within the walls of his now, rightful home. Right from an early age, he was

evicted from the castle and made to find accommodation elsewhere. Fortunately, this turned out for the better. The blacksmith and his wife made far better parents than his biological parents, in every respect.

The castle appeared deserted. Room after room, they peered in. They all echoed with emptiness. The priceless furniture had all gone, presumably burnt for heat. Finally, they reached the top floor, it was quite a climb. A flickering light could be seen through the gap at the bottom of one particular door. Java hesitated, his heart raced, was he about to see his brother who he hadn't seen in over thirty years? Larry turned the handle and slowly opened the heavy oak door.

Surprisingly, the enormous room was warm and cosy, perhaps a little too warm. A welcoming fire of broken-up, priceless furniture was flickering away in the hearth. Two people sat motionless in lavishly adorned chairs, facing the heat of the fire. They had no desire to turn around and see who had entered the room.

'Close that door, I can feel a draft!' came a shrill voice from one of the chairs.

All four entered. Larry purposely slammed the door behind him.

'Your dinner sire: Roast pig, shallots, garlic and roast potatoes,' said Java.

'About time, bring it to us!' growled an objectionable man in the other chair.

'Just messing with you!' said Java.

They probably didn't understand the nuances of the 21st- century phrase but it didn't particularly matter.

The objectionable man turned in his chair.

'Who the blazes? You will lose your heads for this!' bellowed the *temporary* King.

'Who is it, dearest Son?' said a withered old lady in the other chair.

'Do not worry, Mother. We will have four fresh heads to burn on our fire shortly,' said Rosh loudly, as he stood up and grabbed his sword.

Everyone sniggered. A huge, overweight, whale of a man, bald and aged, haphazardly waved his sword about.

'I should put that down before you hurt yourself, Brother,' laughed Java.

The objectionable man, Rosh, froze and instantly lost his tongue.

‘Deal with the matter with haste, Son and thence summon the cook. My stomach is in need of nourishment,’ said the old woman who still hadn’t revealed herself.

‘I think you will have to go down to the kitchens and rustle something up yourself, Mother,’ said Java.

Now, Java had both their attention. The old woman eased herself from the chair and faced Java.

‘You were banished to the Netherworld, how dare you return,’ snarled Rosh.

‘Yes, you are not allowed in this castle, begone with you!’ snapped the frail, trembling, old woman.

This was exactly how Java wanted it to be. No love lost, no insincerity. He couldn’t have coped with a tearful reunion – besides, it was much too late to build any bridges now. Rosh was unperturbed and began recklessly swishing his sword about. Java had no time for this childish behaviour. He used his useful bolt of lightning trick which hit the sword, forcing Rosh to drop it.

‘I need the dragon horn, where is it?’ asked Java, sternly.

‘Somewhere, where you’ll never find it,’ snorted Rosh.

‘Rosh, face facts, a mistake was made, you are not the firstborn, that’s why the horn doesn’t work for you. The kingdom is dying, I’m the only one who can save it. For goodness’ sake, tell me where it is?’ demanded Java.

Rosh paused for a moment whilst he composed himself.

‘I am the King! The King of Marutuk. How dare you question my sovereignty! You will never find the horn… not in a million years!’ bawled Rosh.

‘What’s happened to you? We used to play so well together. We’re of the same mould. Somewhere inside you, there must still be honour and compassion, despite what ills our father has instilled in you,’ said Java.

‘Do not listen to him, my precious son. He has been to the Netherworld and kissed the serpents. Look at his clothes, the devil’s clothes. His shoes are made from demon’s leather. His hair and skin glow with false youthfulness. He is as the devil is!’ snarled the old woman.

‘Remember, you gave me your coat, it was a compassionate act. It kept me warm and saved my life. Now it’s time for your compassion to

return. Please, help me save the lives of the kingdom's people and the dragons,' pleaded Java.

Rosh thought about what Java had said, it plucked a few heartstrings but was nowhere near enough to drag him out of his deeply ingrained tyrannical ways.

'I've told you, you'll never find the horn, not in a million years. I grow tiresome of your witterings – begone!' snapped Rosh.

Java was, on the whole, easy-going, forgiving and tolerant. On this occasion, these fine qualities were being tested to the limit.

'Come on, let's get out of here, away from these sad individuals,' said Java (in English).

Jennifer had rarely seen her father as he was now, embittered and angry. Despite this, she had an important question to ask.

'Are they my uncle and grandma?'

'Not anymore. I would never burden you with such distasteful people. The evilness of my father was clearly contagious.'

Java had often thought about how it would be if he ever met his old family again. He was surprised to find his mother still alive, but the years had not been kind to her. He was certain that his mother once loved him, just as she did Rosh. However, over the years, she had clearly become cold-hearted and bitter towards him. The years hadn't been kind to his brother either. That's what evil does – that's what evil always does. The kingdom had been spared from another evil king, but not in the most ideal way.

'He's determined not to help me or the kingdom. We urgently need to find the dragon horn, but it could be anywhere,' fretted Java.

'Doesn't it give off some sort of a signal,' suggested Larry.

'Don't be ridiculous!' snapped Java.

'Dad, he's just trying to help,' said Jennifer in a calming manner.

'Yes, of course, sorry Larry. Just a little wound up at the moment. Only one thing we can do: get the people of the kingdom to help us in the search,' said Java.

'Could be difficult, they're all in bed and starving to death,' said Lloyd.

'Well, my brother has made it quite clear where there's food, probably, plenty of it. Pity there's no one to cook it for them,' said Java.

'Yeah, such a shame!' mocked Jennifer.

As they had discovered earlier, the castle was completely deserted apart from Rosh and his mother. No guards, no servants, no cooks. No one had bothered to stay around. That's how loyal the staff were to their master. Everyone was at home trying their best to keep warm.

The kitchen was at the rear of the castle on the ground floor. To everyone's disbelief, the larders were brimming over with all manner of breads, cakes, meats, vegetables and fruit. Everything was perfectly fresh because of the extreme cold. There was enough food to feed the entire kingdom for probably a week.

'The people of Marutuk must know about this and I know the best people to spread the word,' said Java.

This reunion *would* be different. Java knew there would be tears of joy, hugs and surprises – everything there should be in a long-overdue homecoming – providing they were still alive. He remembered exactly where the house was. It all came back to him, the bakery on the corner, now closed and further down the street, the grocery, also closed. Right at the far end of the street, attached to the blacksmith's yard, a small house came into view. As with all the other houses, the windows were completely frozen up. Java and his company walked down the short garden path and tentatively knocked on the door – no one answered. He knocked again, only harder, but still no reply.

'Doesn't look like they're in, Dad.'

'They must be, they have to be,' said Java, now hammering on the door.

The unexpected commotion alerted a young woman from across the street. She hurried across to them.

'Strangers, can I help you?' she asked politely.

'Yes, Dalkus and Junie, they used to live here?' enquired Java, hesitantly.

'They did indeed,' said the woman, cheerfully.

'Oh, they've passed away then,' said Java, sombrely. 'My name is Java. These people are my family and friend.'

'Java? No, you can't be? Not the same Java who was banished from the kingdom?!'

'Yes, the very same. You've heard of me then? But surely, that happened long before you were born?'

'Dalkus and Junie are very much alive. They're my grandparents, they

live with us now. They'll be more than pleased to see you, come, come!' beckoned the young woman.

This was all so strange for Java. He had been away for a very long time. Dalkus and Junie had a granddaughter who was as old as Jennifer. The four of them followed the woman across the slushy cobbled road, sharing in Java's trepidation.

'Nan and Pops, we have some very special visitors. Someone to see you!'

Java was naturally apprehensive – trembling discretely. His thoughts journeyed back to his teenage years. Perhaps he had purposely pushed these memories to the back of his mind, but now he realised how deeply he had missed his adopted parents. At first, Dalkus and Junie stared coldly at Java, but then they saw the scar on his forehead. In an instant and their hearts opened up. They were truly overjoyed.

Java was convinced that they hadn't changed one little bit, but of course, they had. Time had soldiered on, with both approaching their eighties. For all but a tiny matter of biology, they were Java's true parents. They loved Java just like proper parents do and had deeply grieved all those years ago when he was banished. Now, despite the intense cold, there was such warmth of feelings and floods of joyful tears. Their son had returned after nearly forty years.

'This is my daughter, Jennifer, her husband, Larry and my friend, Lloyd,' said Java.

Naturally, everything was spoken in Welsh, but strangely enough, there was no language barrier. Larry presented them with a hessian bag full of food including a large frozen chicken.

After a long-overdue meal and a brief catch-up of the last forty years, Java told them about his mix-up at birth. For some reason, it didn't come as a surprise.

'We've always had our suspicions,' said Junie. 'That terrible day when you were banished, many people in the kingdom had a bad feeling about it.'

'Anyway, there's no point in dwelling in the past. Mistakes happen Priority right now is to find the dragon horn,' said Java suppressing his feelings.'

Dalkus was the perfect person to confide in. Despite his age, he remained the kingdom's blacksmith and carried a lot of weight with the people. In a very short time, his daughter had assembled what seemed like half the town to hear what Java had to say. He asked everyone to search for the dragon horn and then he told them where

to find food. He also thought it prudent to mention that there were people from the Netherworld presently invading the kingdom. He implored the people not to antagonise them and give them a wide berth. Hopefully, they would, most likely, be gone by evening.

19. No dragons

By now, Wurtherly's men were already venturing deep into the kingdom. House after house and building after building was pillaged. The raiders helped themselves to ornaments, trinkets and valuables. Hundreds of photographs and videos were taken for evidence. There was never anything to say, the language barrier conveniently saw to that. Wurtherly's men were ruthless and indifferent to the people's feelings. They had been hand-picked to be this way. They barged into homes without knocking, waved their guns about, took what they wanted and left, without even closing the door behind them.

Naturally, Wurtherly was maddened that no dragons were flying about. After all, this was the whole point of the *visit*. The world would just see it as a lost settlement in the middle of the mountains. Nevertheless, it was primitive culture, completely misplaced in time. This was just the type of thing the people of the Netherworld liked to read about and perhaps visit, on an extortionately expensive, organised trip.

20. Party time

The castle kitchens were raided. Every morsel of food was taken: every carrot, every grape, every frozen chicken and as a bonus, every bottle of wine from the wine cellar. Many people donated any spare firewood and a fire was lit in the blacksmith's forge – this was ideal for cooking on a grand scale. The cooked food was fairly distributed along with the wine and fruit. It wasn't long before the hunger pangs had faded and people's spirits had lifted.

The search could now begin.

Now that bellies had stopped grumbling and bones had stopped shivering, many had enough energy to put some warm clothes on and venture outside. The people knew how vital it was to find the dragon horn. It seemed that the whole kingdom was in on the search, but finding a needle in a haystack had better odds. The last time it was seen was when the King failed to summon the dragons with it. Any resolution to this predicament seemed to be rapidly fading. As Rosh had so pertinently said, they would never find the horn in a million years. It was beginning to appear that his prediction was correct. There was, however, something bothering Java. It was the way his brother said, 'in a million years' and he said it twice. He had heard his brother say these exact words before, many years ago in better days.

After an intense day of fruitless searching, the people decided to call it a day. They resigned themselves to fate. It seemed the end of the Marutuk kingdom and the end of the dragons. However, Java certainly wasn't ready to accept defeat. He was, after all, the rightful king in all but the coronation and crowning.

To add to the despair of the people, a storm was approaching. Even colder weather was on its way.

Java needed to speak to the crowds again.

'We will get through this. The kingdom is not in any way, fated. I know where there is an inexhaustible source of meat, and keeping warm is certainly not a problem. Our bodies give off a little bit of warmth. If many of us congregate in one large room, we will warm up

the room. This is not devilry but something called science. There are many such rooms in the castle that are draught free and large enough to accommodate hundreds of people. Gather your families together, young and old, and make your way into the castle.'

His speech was met with rousing cheers from the people. It was prudent that Java didn't reveal that the inexhaustible source of meat was, in fact, bat meat – that may not have gone down too well.

The people heeded Java's words and made their way in droves, across the drawbridge, into the extravagant castle. For most, it was the first time they had crossed the threshold into the luxurious, majestic building. People only knew of damp floors, draughty stone walls and leaky thatched rooves. Now, they were witnessing lavishly decorated ceilings, marble floors and oak panelled walls. Evenly spread about, everyone in the whole kingdom managed to fit inside the castle with room to spare. As a precaution, Java requested that the drawbridge be raised. This was a wise measure to keep the present Netherworld invaders out.

That evening, for the very first time, the spacious castle was used to capacity. Every huge, lavishly decorated room, apart from one, was packed with happy, chatty people. There were so many people in each of the large rooms, that the windows had to be opened to let some heat out. Despite the abundance of people, there was still enough space in the rooms for people to dance, socialise and get merry on the castle's endless supply of ale. For the first time in months, perhaps years, the people were joyful and contented.

In just one room of the castle, this was not the case. Rosh and his mother sat in their uncomfortable chairs, staring, silently, into the remaining few cinders of the fire. They could hear the commotion, the laughs, the jollity, but they were not, and never would be, part of it.

Java, Jennifer, Larry and Lloyd mingled with the crowds, flitting from one room to another. It was like one massive party. Despite the language barrier between Jennifer and Larry, they were accepted into the fold and got merry together. Lloyd liked talking, it was a good excuse to practice his Welsh language skills. Despite being happily married to Eileen, it turned out that he was a bit of a lady's man.

As to be expected, countless people wanted to talk to Java. He remained polite and sociable at all times but was only really interested in meeting one particular person. He reached into his pocket for the pouch containing the lock of hair. It was always comforting to know that it was there. Would he recognise her, would she recognise him? After socialising in many rooms for many hours, he resigned himself

to the fact that fate would not bring them together. It was disheartening, but time had moved on – significantly. Since then, there had been another love in his life who had provided him with two daughters and two granddaughters. He had to be satisfied.

He buried his face in a flagon of ale.

'Hello Java,' said a good-looking, middle-aged woman. 'I've waited for you,' she said softly.

Java slowly lifted his head out of his drink and gazed at her for a few uncomfortable moments.

'Delyth?'

'Yes, who else would I be?' she snapped.

'You… you haven't changed at all, you're as beautiful as I last saw you,' said Java.

'You've learnt to lie well. So, where've you been all my life?'

'Oh, just here and there, you know.'

'Have you thought about me at all?'

The pace of the conversation was far too brisk and casual, Java paused for a moment.

'I have, every minute of every day,' he said softly.

For now, nothing more needed to be said. They looked so deeply into each other's eyes that they were transported into another time and another place. They were young again, lying together on a grassy bank next to a babbling brook with only sheep to disturb their privacy. They remembered the pledge they made, a pledge that couldn't be broken. That was the only way to deal with the deepest kind of love they had for each other. They could have stayed like that all evening and all night but Jennifer was enjoying the ale a little too much and happened to stumble by.

'Dad! This is where you're hiding. You know, these people are sooo lovely, sooo friendly. I do believe I love everybody. Oops, I hope I'm not interrupting… Oh dear, I think I going to be sick. Larry has already been sick… Must find a bathroom,' rambled a sozzled Jennifer.

'Well, language barrier or not, I know a daughter when I see one,' said Delyth.

'Delyth, thirty-six years is a long time. Besides, I didn't think I'd ever see you again.'

‘Thirty-six years, four months and twelve days I’ve waited, I had nothing else to do but wait,’ said Delyth sternly.

‘What was I supposed to have done, join a monastery? Anyway, surely you didn’t expect me to survive the banishment?’

‘I believed in you. If anyone could have survived, you could. So, you have a wife then?’

‘She died many years ago.’

‘Did you love her?’

‘Yes, I loved her just as I love you and always will love you,’ said Java.

‘You expect me to believe that?

Before Java replied, he reached into his pocket and took out the pouch containing her lock of hair.

‘Yes, I’ve kept it by me, close to my heart. You see, it is possible to love two people.’

There was now a certainty. Java’s home was Marutuk, it always had been. Now, it could never be anywhere else. He would never see Vancouver again. There was another certainty, Delyth was to be his queen – if she would have him.

21. Dragons galore

The people of Marutuk were certainly having the best of times, but Wurtherly and his operatives were certainly having the worst of times. The storm came in as predicted, stopping them from leaving the kingdom. Because of the strong winds, they had to deflate the huge balloons to prevent them from tearing from their moorings and being damaged. This was not an easy job, especially with the weather conditions and darkness. Sounds of distant revelling coming from the castle didn't help their mood. A decision was made that they would head that way when their work was done even though they certainly wouldn't be welcome.

Unfortunately, when they eventually arrived at the castle, they found the drawbridge raised. Wurtherly ordered two of his men to wade across the moat, then get into the castle and lower the drawbridge. Reluctantly, two men waded in, but it was too deep – and too cold. He ordered them to swim across, but they point blank refused. Despite being paid handsomely, there was a limit to what his men were prepared to do. Wurtherly was naturally furious and jumped around in a raging tantrum. Wurtherly and his men had no choice but to return to the field and erect their one-man mountaineering tents. All they could look forward to was an uncomfortable, cold night's sleep. Wurtherly was not spared this inconvenience, he too had to sleep in a tent – albeit a much more elaborate one than the rest.

Fortunately, by morning, the storm had passed by. Now, it was all-hands-on-deck to get the balloons inflated. They had no intention of spending another uncomfortable night in a cold, claustrophobic tent.

Many things turned over in Java's mind, that night. It was a wonderful night, but that aside, there was something niggling at him. He tried to narrow it down: was it something Rosh said – or perhaps his mother? He knew Rosh, probably better than anyone. For years they had played together as children. They didn't need anyone else, they amused themselves. Countless times they ventured off into the woods to play games, away from the people and away from the guards and king. They knew every inch of the woods in the Marutuk kingdom,

every hiding place, every tree and every rock. For hours they played as warriors with their wooden swords – never any wounds just one or two splinters. On other days they played hide and seek. 'Keep your eyes closed, count to one hundred, *you won't find me… in a million years*,' Rosh often said…

Java woke with a start.

That's it, I know where the horn is!' he yelled in English.

Delyth opened her eyes and smiled. 'Now that's very odd indeed,' she thought to herself.

A team was gathered. All but Java had a hangover – the sort that would take a while to get over. Java wanted Delyth to accompany them, but she had to attend to her frailing mother first. She would join them later.

When they were young, the woods seemed only minutes away – they ran all the way. Now, it was quite a jaunt, especially for the ones with throbbing heads. To everyone's shock, it was a 'wood' with no wood. Every single tree, bush and sapling had been felled for firewood, right down to the smallest twig.

'How can you have a hiding place now, without trees?' puzzled Larry.

'We used to hide behind rocks and if my memory serves, there should be a small shallow cave somewhere close by. It was a good place to hide in, especially as it was pitch dark inside.'

'That's it then! The horn will be in the cave?' sparked Jennifer.

'That would be too easy,' said Java.

Eventually, they found the cave. Lloyd, maintaining his role as a guide, conveniently had his headtorch with him, enabling them to search in every nook and cranny. Unfortunately, there was no horn to be found.

'Back to the drawing board,' sighed Lloyd.

'Well, if you ask me, that would have been a stupid place to leave the horn anyway. Eventually, someone was bound to go in the cave and find it,' said Larry.

'Darling, you're not helping,' said Jennifer.

'No, he's right, far too obvious,' said Java, deep in thought. 'There was something that happened here a few years later, but you couldn't exactly call it playing.'

'No, far from it,' said a welcoming voice.

They were too preoccupied to notice Delyth approaching.

‘Your mother, is she alright?’ asked Java, trying his best not to look overjoyed to see her, but failing.

‘She’s fine, a neighbour’s staying with her.’

‘This is Delyth, everybody… Larry, Lloyd and Jennifer,’ said Java, taking care of the introduction.

‘I believe we’ve already met. How come you can speak English?’ puzzled Jennifer.

‘Miracles seem to happen… after a night with your father,’ said Delyth with a cheeky smile.

‘Not miracles, just the kingdom’s magic,’ said Java briskly, trying to avoid an awkward moment.

If anyone happened to be looking Jennifer’s way, it was clear that she was a little uneasy with this hasty romance. However, there was no denying that she wanted what was best for her father.

‘Thought I better join you and make sure you’re not overly modest, I know what you’re like,’ said Delyth.

‘Yes, right, as I was saying, it wasn’t a good day. Not now but as teenagers, my brother and I were identical. We were almost impossible to tell apart. In fact, it was only our clothes that set us apart. It was impossible for me to dress like Rosh, with his fine, extravagant clothes, but he could easily dress like me. He often claimed that he had pretended to be me and no one had realised. He did it to irritate me, but one day he took the taunting too far…’

‘We were just by those rocks, holding each other, talking and watching the clouds go by. It was a lovely day,’ said Delyth.

‘Oh, you’ve known each other sometime then?’ probed Jennifer.

‘Since we were children,’ said Delyth casually, allaying any fears of possible royal gold-digging.

‘Can I continue?’ snapped Java, becoming agitated with the interruptions. ‘Everything was perfect and then Rosh suddenly appeared on the scene. I think he’d found some of our father’s rum, he was not himself. He began bragging, claiming that he had pretended to be me and been with my Delyth.’

‘He hadn’t, a girl knows. There’s more to a person than just their looks,’ said Delyth.

‘But I didn’t know that then. What else could I do? Your honour was

at stake, my honour was at stake.'

'Yes, but Rosh took the first punch, don't forget,' said Delyth, supportively.

'When I think back, it was quite satisfying, he'd been asking for it for weeks. He may have got the first punch in, but I made up for it. I was backing him into the rocks, and then it happened, he suddenly disappeared,' said Java.

'Disappeared? More magic?' quizzed Larry.

'No, he means he fell down a small crevasse in the ground!' said Delyth.

'I couldn't reach him, he was wedged in the hole. I ran into town for help, leaving Delyth to console Rosh. As soon as the guards realised it was the future king down the hole, all hell broke loose. The King was alerted and quickly arrived at the scene, on his horse. I was immediately detained by the castle guards,' said Java.

'It was all overplayed. The guards got him out without any fuss. They just lowered a rope down and pulled him out. He barely had a scratch on him,' said Delyth.

'Apart from the black eyes! The King was not happy though,' said Java.

'I should say not! He accused Java of trying to kill the future king. He wrongly accused Java of forcibly pushing Rosh down the hole and then leaving him there to die,' said Delyth.

'Surely, everyone could see that that was nonsense,' said Jennifer.

'The King had made his mind up. He wouldn't listen to anyone, but Rosh could have told it the way it was. He could have said it was just an accident, but he was so angry, so twisted, just like his father,' said Delyth, clearly still upset about the events of that day.

It was difficult for Java to talk about what happened next so Delyth took over.

'The King's word was law. Java was sentenced to four weeks in the cold dark dungeons beneath the castle. He was brutally chained up against a cold damp wall, living with mice and rats with no food and only the condensation on the walls to drink. It was an ordeal to break any man, but Java was only sixteen. When he was finally released, he had lost almost half his body weight and had to be carried out on a stretcher. No longer did he look like his twin brother,' said Delyth, holding back her tears.

‘It was an experience I have tried hard to forget, but my dreams often cruelly bring it all back. If it wasn’t for Delyth at my side, night and day for many weeks, while I recuperated, I most certainly would have died,’ concluded Java.

Java showed everyone the scars around his wrists where the shackles dug in, right down to the bone. Jennifer held her father tightly. Delyth also wanted to hold him tightly, but she was patient, there would be many opportunities in the future for that kind of thing.

‘What did they do with the hole – the crevasse?’ asked Larry, appearing to be unmoved.

‘Filled it in with stones, I guess,’ said Java.

‘Well, that would be a good hiding place. If Rosh had fallen into the crevasse while playing hide and seek and knocked himself out, his bragging may have come true. You may not have found him in a million years,’ said Larry intelligently.

‘That’s it! That’s where the horn will be. Rosh has buried it!’ cheered Jennifer.

It had been near on forty years since the hole had been filled in, but there were signs that the ground had recently been disturbed. Larry and Lloyd removed several stones, until finally, half a metre down, they found the small gold horn. Inside the horn was a parchment with a short note on it:

“Best, the horn defies me for only immorality I bequeath.

Best suited is my brother, to make the dragons breathe.”

In the far distance, they heard the fiery mechanisms of the Netherworld’s giant hot air balloons. They watched them rise, gracefully into the sky. To the people elsewhere in the kingdom, now, mostly with hangovers, they were almost dragon-like, but in a different guise: A device inside the hanging basket, similar to a dragon’s mouth, projecting flames upwards into the bowels of the huge flying machine’s stomach.

Wurtherly and his men were leaving with substantial evidence of the kingdom and many stolen artefacts. They needed to be stopped.

There was no time like the present to test out the dragon horn. Java blew into the mouthpiece as hard as his cheeks and lungs could bear. For a long, worrying moment nothing seemed to happen, but then, groans and grunts began to reverberate around the surrounding mountains. The dragons had been slumbering for a very long time. The groans and grunts got loud and louder until the ground began to

shake. The deafening din came from every corner of the kingdom. It was as though the mountains were protesting in the most troublesome way possible.

Then, the dragons in their hundreds, emerged from their caves, coughing and spluttering fire. Their wings were stiff, their bodies cold. Their first flight would be clumsy, but inevitably they had to spread their wings and take the bold step of leaving their rocky ledges. They waited, tentatively, for Dirchef, the head dragon, to make the first move, but Dirchef would not fly until he heard the correct command.

'Go on then, three blasts on the horn,' prompted Delyth.

'Yes, I know, I know!' snapped Java.

Once more Java blew the magical horn. Three loud ear-grating blasts were Dirchef's cue to launch himself off the ledge of his cave. Then immediately, the other dragons followed. So extreme was the cumulative downdraft from all their wings, that it caused storm-force winds throughout the kingdom.

'Are you getting this!?' yelled Wurtherly.

Every film and video camera they had to hand was now whirring and flashing away. This was exactly what they were hoping to see: countless dragons, as big as passenger jets, pervading the kingdom's air space and projecting fire from their mouths. Their vantage point, from high up in the steady and silent hot air balloons, was perfect. Every sound, every angle, and every detail was being captured, not only digitally, but also on old-school celluloid film. Now Wurtherly had the scoop of all scoops – the scoop of all time. This would change everything. The science books would have to be rewritten and many fables would have to be re-evaluated as truth rather than fairy tales.

Precisely because of all this, he had to be stopped.

Dirchef homed in on the new future king of the realm and landed magnificently, almost at Java's feet. He was truly formidable, albeit, a gentle giant of a creature. Nature had truly pulled out all the stops for a creature such as this to evolve.

'Hello old friend,' said Java.

Dirchef recognised Java. Even though the dragon couldn't talk or communicate in any normal way, this fact was clear. Dirchef curled his long neck, bringing his head level with Java's. His scaly face and deep-set, angry eyes belied his gentle nature. Jennifer, Larry and Lloyd were naturally spellbound and speechless, and instinctively stepped back a few metres. To be so close to such a fabled creature was almost too much to take in, but Delyth had seen it all before.

Java now sensed a connection, something impossible to describe, a kind of mental bond on a very fundamental level.

'I have a favour to ask,' he said – or thought, it could have been either.

Java pointed at the hot air balloons in the distance.

'Stop them but spare their lives.'

Dirchef immediately responded and with one immense downward push of his wings, shot, clumsily, into the air. The downdraft was so strong that everyone was blown clean off their feet. With an unwavering devotion to the new king, the leader of the dragons somehow signalled to five other dragons.

Despite a profusion of gunfire, the six dragons followed Java's instructions. Their fiery breath set the balloons alight. The nylon material burnt quickly, leaving the ropes and baskets to suddenly fall out of the sky. In a perfectly choreographed manoeuvre, the dragons caught the ropes and skilfully, although not particularly gently, lowered the baskets to the ground. No one was hurt, but many bullets had been spent.

This time, Wurtherly was into a new level of anger – outraged, barely touched it.

It was now apparent that certain smaller things escaped the technology barrier's restrictions. It was definitely a size-matters thing. As proved before with the SD card, smaller devices seemed to work, like digital cameras, propane burners and regretfully, handguns. Some basic technology in the kingdom, purely for making life easier, had to be a good thing. After all, it had been stuck in the dark ages for a very long time. However, as undesirable as it was, weaponry seemed to fit into the category of progress.

Dirchef now re-joined the rest of his kind. Now that the rightful heir was blowing the horn, the dragons could proceed with their obligation to the kingdom. Their first task was to warm up the lands of the realm, encircled by the high mountains. The ice and snow would then melt, the change of climate would push the clouds away and the crops would begin to grow.

Meanwhile, in his capacity of ruler-in-waiting of the kingdom, Java had to deal with a serious matter.

It was a confrontation that couldn't wait.

22. Smelly socks

Unbeknown to Java and his group, Wurtherly had captured two of the Marutuk people. Originally, they were supposed to be exhibits of a ‘lost civilisation’, but now they were hostages, held at gunpoint. The media mogul waited patiently for Java.

By the time Java arrived to face his nemesis, a large crowd had gathered near the now, balloon-less baskets. Before Java could say anything, Delyth screamed out.

‘He’s got Miar and Olwen, my daughters!’

It took a moment for the penny to drop.

‘Daughters? That means…’

‘Yes, thirty-six years is a long time. What was *I* supposed to do?’ asked Delyth, poignantly, echoing Java’s retort, earlier.

Wurtherly, was out of the basket, standing firm with several of his men, all armed. Java and Delyth bravely approached him, leaving Jennifer, Larry and Lloyd at a safe distance. Java noticed the rage in his eyes, just as he remembered in his father’s.

‘I am Java, the rightful king of Marutuk. I am asking you to civilly surrender your plunder and your equipment, I have no desire for conflict,’ he said loudly and clearly – and slightly nervously.

A few moments passed while Wurtherly seethed in his deepening rage.

‘Just so you know who has the upper hand here. Briggs, kill the woman.’ he said coldly.

Briggs hesitated for far too long, after all, he wasn’t being paid enough to commit murder.

‘Just can’t get the staff,’ said Wurtherly as he trained his gun on Delyth and heartlessly shot her in the stomach.

During the initial moments of the horrendous act, Delyth didn’t understand what had happened. She had never seen a gun before. She certainly didn’t understand the concept of being shot. All she did

know was that it was extremely painful. Then her life force drained from her as she collapsed into a pool of her own blood. Java was horrified and overcome with emotion. He supported her head and kissed her cheek, but she didn't stir. Jennifer rushed over to her; she was medically trained. She covered the wound to slow down the bleeding, but the prospects didn't look good.

Uncontrollable Rage began to erupt within Java's soul. The calm, collected persona was pushed aside. Fury now saturated his spirit and pulsed through his veins. His whole life was compressed into a moment of negative thought: The ill-treatment from his father, the horrific experience in the dungeon and then the shame of being banished from his home, his kingdom. He thought about the death of his wife and daughter and the years hounded by people, employed by this man, standing before him. Life had been so cruel and now, the final evil act, this same man had removed the life force from the love of his life.

'Keep her comfortable, I'll be back in a minute. There's something I have to do,' said Java, as precisely and calmly as he could.

Java stood tall and approached Wurtherly.

'You really shouldn't have done that.'

'Why, what are you going to do, shout at me?' Wurtherly sniggered, evilly.

His men also sniggered, but nervously.

'No. It goes completely against my nature, but I am forced to put an end to your life,' said Java as he raised his hand.

This time, a finger's worth of lightning was insufficient for what Java had in mind. A whole hand's worth was necessary to carry out his threat. The mogul giant, Wurtherly, managed to fire one shot at Java before his whole body quickly became a charred corpse. His men just stood and watched as the horror took place. The smell of burning flesh filled the air. Somehow it was more pungent than normal burning flesh. They didn't attempt to pat out the flames or smother him in a blanket or throw water over him, it wasn't in their job description. Wurtherly's final bullet, fortunately, turned out to be a wasted shot. It had harmlessly bounced off Java's dragon skin coat. Once again, the gift from his brother had probably saved his life.

Java turned his back on Wurtherly's men and hastily returned to Delyth.

'She's still got a pulse, but it's weak,' fretted Jennifer. 'I don't suppose your party trick works on bullets?'

‘I don’t know, I’ll try anything. Quick, pull up her blouse,’ said Java as calmly as he could.

Just as before, Java took out his knife and slit his hand. There was now blood everywhere – dripping from Java’s hand and oozing from Delyth’s stomach. He placed his hand firmly on the wound. Instantly, as the blood mixed together, the damaged skin began to smoke and sizzle.

Now released from their captors, Delyth’s daughters rushed over to their critically wounded mother. Naturally, they were horrified at the sight of her stomach smouldering away.

‘What are you doing to her!’ they screamed in Welsh.

Lloyd blocked their path and spoke gently, but firmly to them, ‘Keep calm, Java knows what he’s doing. Hopefully, this will save her life. Best that you don’t watch. Please, let them have some space.’

Java eventually removed his hand. The good news was that the bleeding had stopped. The bad news: Delyth had a huge, third-degree burn, encroaching deeply into her ribs. The bullet was now visible at the base of the wound. Jennifer carefully picked it out and examined it. She was amazed how such a small thing could cause so much devastation to human flesh.

Olwen managed to catch sight of the severely burnt hole in her mother’s stomach.

‘She can’t possibly survive an injury like that!’ she screamed *(in Welsh)*

This was a worrying moment. For a while, nothing seemed to be happening. As it was, the injury was hideous, blackened and gaping. However, almost imperceptibly, the outer edges of the wound started to deform and swell – brand new flesh was forming. After five minutes, the wound was half the size. After ten minutes, the wound had all but disappeared. After fifteen minutes, Delyth's stomach was as good as new, but she remained unconscious.

‘Why isn’t she waking?’ panicked Java.

Jennifer checked her pulse and breathing, everything appeared normal.

‘I don’t know, she should be alright now.’

‘Following tradition, a sleeping beauty doesn’t stir until she’s had a kiss from her prince charming,’ said Delyth with her eyes tightly shut.

‘Ho hum, Java’s work is never done.’

The scene at that moment in time was certainly a complex one:

There was an ever-growing crowd of Kingdom's people at one end of the field/football pitch. Some were weeping, but most were cheering.

Towards the other end of the field, rested the tattered remains of six hot air balloons.

To the middle of the pitch, thirty-nine of Wurtherly's men, now without a leader, stood motionless, perilous to do anything in case they also got incinerated.

Next to them lay a pile of smoking human bones – the remains of Wurtherly.

In between the people and Wurtherly's men, Java was kissing Delyth, perhaps a little more than was necessary.

Nearby, Jennifer, Miar and Olwen were doing their best to communicate with each other, in different languages.

A little further away, Lloyd and Larry were standing idly by, with their hands in their pockets.

To complete the scene, in the skies above, countless dragons continued to circle in formation, steadily warming the atmosphere with their fiery breath. They wouldn't rest until the temperature was exactly twenty-one degrees – *warm enough for anyone?*

Before Java could move on with all things associated with becoming the rightful king of a kingdom, he had a relatively small matter to attend to. He forcibly parted himself from Delyth and approached the thirty-nine leaderless men. In reality, they were no longer a threat, they just wanted to go home. However, with their balloons destroyed, they had no idea how it was going to happen.

'We can deal with this in two ways,' said Java as calmly and friendly as he could. 'Either we continue fighting. Probably one or two of my people may get injured, but, all of you will most certainly die… Or you can leave all your cameras behind and return all my people's possessions and artefacts. Then, I will ask the dragons to drop you off at the top of the mountains. You will then have a three-mile walk before you reach the military exclusion zone. I hope you've all got warm clothes. So, It's entirely up to you.'

The thirty-nine men pointlessly conferred amongst themselves for a few seconds. Naturally, it was a foregone decision, no one wanted to fight – or get incinerated. They were only there because they were on treble time. A spokesperson was nominated to speak,

'The second option.'

That's all he said. No apology, no regret, no manners, but it was sufficient. From their six large wicker baskets, they quickly offloaded all the articles, trinkets and possessions they had gathered, plus all the camera equipment and all their weapons.

'We don't want your weapons, just your bullets – all of them!' said Java sternly.

When that was done, Larry and Lloyd had to take their hands out of their pockets because they had important work to do. There was a possibility that someone may try to sneak something back into the Netherworld. The baskets had to be searched and then everyone frisked from head to toe. Two miniature film spy cameras, no bigger than a matchbox were found concealed down someone's socks. In a way, Lloyd and Larry admired his bravery, but he certainly couldn't be allowed to go unpunished. It was only right that the punishment was equally shared out.

What exactly Lloyd and Larry were going to do with thirty-nine pairs of military-grade thermal socks was anyone's guess.

The thirty-nine sockless men climbed into five of the six baskets. One basket was to remain in the kingdom. It was now time for Java to summon the dragons. He blew the small horn five times. Instantly, five dragons, including Dirchef, broke formation and landed as close to Java as they could get. With so many people milling about, this was a precarious undertaking. Java gave Dirchef the instructions. The dragons had done this kind of work many times in the past. Everyone backed off and gave the dragons room to manoeuvre. One by one, they grabbed hold of the basket framework with their talons and shot into the sky. Five huge dragons flying through the air with large wicker baskets dangling beneath them would have made a priceless photo. So frustrating for the Transtell media giant and more so the owner, Wurtherly, who was now a pile of ashes. The mission had been an utter failure. In a few moments, they had reached the mountain tops and after a few more moments, they were completely out of sight.

'Good riddance!' said Jennifer.

'You were very forgiving there, Java, especially as they tried to sneak out those spy cameras?' said Larry

'Not really, I told Dirchef to drop them off on the southern mountains. That's ten miles from the military patrol, across much harsher terrain,' said Java.

'That' an awful long way to walk without socks,' said Larry.

'You didn't?' said Java.

‘Oh yes we did!’ said Lloyd, holding up a bag of smelly socks.

For the first time in a very long while, they all had a good old chuckle.

23. Battle of Kings

There was an important question Java had to ask, but he had to pick the right moment.

As yet, Java wasn't officially the King – not until his coronation. However, there was a hurdle, a significant one: his brother Rosh was the present King and ruler of the realm. Java could only become king if his brother agreed to be dethroned or was forced off the throne.

To dethrone a king was unprecedented. It went against every law of the land. Rosh was believed to be the rightful successor to his father, but it was a mistake – he wasn't the firstborn, Java was. If Rosh wouldn't leave the throne willingly, there would have to be a battle. The battle would be between the king's men and Java's men. Java had two: Larry and Lloyd, Rosh had no one to speak of – everyone disliked him. This predicament necessitated Java visiting his brother once more.

He was still in the same room of the castle with his mother. The warmth of the outside had yet to penetrate the thick walls of the castle and the fire had gone out hours ago. It was freezing and the royal blankets were doing little to keep them warm. Food still hadn't come up from the kitchens, not that it was ever going to. Both were hungry and cold. Java wanted to take pity on them, but too much was at stake for that.

'I've come to ask you to dethrone, Brother,' said Java.

Rosh said nothing

'You are not the rightful King, I am the firstborn,' explained Java.

'Do not listen to this festering serpent. He speaks with a demon's tongue and tells the devil's lies,' said their witch-like mother.

'No, I will defend my title in battle. I will assemble my army!' snarled Rosh.

'Rosh, talk sense, you have no army,' Java pointed out.

'Neither do you,' said Rosh.

The battle was a formality, a sham, but still possibly a fight to the death between twin brothers. Java had many powers to strike down Rosh in an instant. Rosh had no powers, just an angry mother by his side. However, Java had no intention of killing his brother. Through all that had gone before, there was a certain amount of brotherly fondness. Reciprocation, however, was an uncertainty.

The town square was chosen by the people, for the battle – a battle of just two men. It was a large square, normally full of market stalls, but that day it was a site for conquest. The crowds gathered, too many to fit in the square. Jennifer and Delyth were the most concerned and would have rather not watched, although they insisted on a front-row seat. The brothers entered the arena of sorts and then the weapons were chosen. It was the current King's privilege to choose the weapons to be used in the *battle*.

'What the?!' said a bewildered Java.

All the weapons available: swords, knives, daggers and spears, were made entirely of wood with any points and edges, blunted.

'I thought we'd use what we've had the most practice with,' said Rosh with a smirk.

'I'm OK with that,' said Java.

They both chose wooden swords and then they began. Two men in their sixties were instantly taken back to their childhood days and the many playfights they had in the woods. Sudden, everything was perfectly clear. With harmless wooden weapons, Java had no need for his magic. It was a clever and perhaps, an endearing tactic by Rosh. He was never intent on a serious battle, just a bit of adult fun.

'Make it look real for mother's benefit,' said Rosh quietly, as they got up close together.

Every time they closed in together, they had something to say to each other.

'You do realise I have to win this battle, don't you?' said Java.

'Yes, but let's make it last. We don't want to disappoint our audience,' said Rosh.

'Why is Mother so bitter towards me?' asked Java.

'On Father's deathbed, he knew he was evil… He thought he could avoid going to hell if he passed all his evil on to Mother… In a way, it was for the best… Before then, she spent most of her life grieving over you,' said Rosh as he swished his wooden sword about.

Hearing this was naturally a shock to Java, he relaxed his grip on the sword.

‘Come on brother, put some effort into it. You’ve got to win, don’t forget!’ snapped Rosh.

‘You let me rot in that dungeon,’ said Java with tears forming in his eyes.

‘I tried to get to you, but Father had a dozen guards blocking the way… I saw to it that Delyth got the potions when they let you out.’

Java decided that Rosh still needed a good hiding. There were many times he was still a cruel brother. The wooden sword battle, intensified. Java backed him into a corner, he tripped over a stone and fell backwards.

‘At least, this time, there’s no hole to swallow you up!’ raged Java, as he placed the point of the sword on his chest.

‘Alright, alright! I’ll dethrone!’ he yelled before the blunted wood marked his lavish tunic.

Java helped Rosh back on his feet. They shook hands and then Rosh took a small box out of his pocket.

‘One of Mother’s rings, she won’t miss it. You never know, you might need it,’ said Rosh.

‘Thanks,’ said Java, not knowing what else to say.

24. Broken heart

Finally, the kingdom could begin planning for the coronation. This aside, Java still had an important question to ask – well two, now. He waited until he was alone with Delyth. This was becoming ever more difficult, being the future king. Fortunately, from their childhood days, he remembered a secluded spot beside the castle moat. There they could be together, alone and undisturbed.

‘Miar and Olwen, lovely girls,’ probed Java.

‘Yes, they are. Hardly *girls* anymore, though.’

‘Erm, who’s their father?’ asked Java, as casually as he could.

‘I was wondering when you were going to ask. If you must know, Grantham, a lovely man. We got married three years after you were banished,’ revealed Delyth.

So painful was this revelation that she may as well have stabbed him in the heart. However, Java was used to disappointment, that’s what he had faced all his life. He had to bear the pain and act civilly.

‘Are you going to introduce me to him?’ asked Java, stoically hiding his feelings.

‘Yes, we can go now if you wish,’ said Delyth.

It was all very strange. Delyth insisted on linking Java as they walked through the streets. Java was very uncomfortable with the situation and behaved very standoffish. Delyth pretended to be unaware of Java’s cool behaviour. They turned a corner, walked through a field next to a little chapel and suddenly stopped.

‘There he is, say hello to Grantham,’ said Delyth brightly.

Java suddenly realised they were standing next to a small gravestone with the name ‘Grantham’ carved on it. He read the date.

‘As you can see, he died twenty-eight years ago. We were only married for five years. Miar was two and Olwen, three.’

‘What an idiot I am, I’m so sorry that I doubted you,’ said Java

humbly.

‘You doubted me? You mean you thought I was still married? Tut, tut, the great Java, future King of Marutuk, reveals his little green-eyed monster and distrusts his future Queen. I don’t know whether to be angry or amused.’

It was perhaps a little presumptuous of Delyth, but she had unintentionally – or intentionally, anticipated and answered his second question.

‘Amused would be best,’ said Java.

‘He died suddenly. He was a lovely man…’

‘I feel a ‘but’ coming on,’ said Java.

‘But, you were always there – in my mind, you wouldn’t go away. I think he always knew that.’

‘I hope he didn’t die of a broken heart?’ suggested Java.

‘Don’t, I couldn’t live with that.’

‘The answer’s yes then?’ asked Java.

‘Why, what was the question?’ she asked, knowing full well what the question was.

‘You want me to get on my knee, don’t you?

‘Of course, these things have to be done properly!’

Java reluctantly knelt down on one knee, took the ring box Rosh had given him, out of his pocket, and opened it. To his and Delyth’s surprise, inside was a beautiful gold ring, inset with an enormous pink diamond.

‘I love you with all of my heart, will you be my Queen?’ asked Java, his knee now getting considerably wet, pressing into the damp ground.

‘You know, I’m still a little sleepy, I don’t think my prince charming has woken me up properly.’

Delyth didn’t have to respond, she wanted to be his queen thirty-six years ago, and nothing had changed. They may have both been on the wrong side of middle-aged, but in their hearts, time had been put on hold. They felt like teenagers again, and now, on the damp grass, out of sight from everyone, they were behaving as teenagers do – especially when deeply in love.

25. A new age

The kingdom was now fully engaged in preparing for two momentous occasions: another coronation and a royal marriage. However, there was one small problem, there was almost no food left – even in the castle kitchen. A double celebration without food was unthinkable. There was only one solution: Java set the people on, making a huge net and several protective head coverings. It was amazing how hunger spurred them on. It was all done in a day.

Because of superstition and fear, the outer edge of the kingdom was rarely visited. Java led a team of brave individuals to the cave – also known as the sewage outlet. He knew of the dangers, he had experienced them first hand. However, he had every confidence that the special headwear and thick clothing would protect them.

The brave men put on their head protection, some with *magical* torch devices attached, and entered the damp, eerie tunnel, dragging the huge net behind them. They didn't have far to go before a few stray bats flew aggressively at them hoping to feast on their flesh. For once, it was going to be the other way around. Many thousands of bats had to be snared if they were to feed the kingdom. They had no choice but to go much deeper into the tunnel. Further and further they penetrated, through the darkness and dankness, until almost all the daylight had faded. It was tough going, wading, ankle-deep through the foul-smelling, slimy bat excrement. They were now being bombarded by flesh-hungry flying creatures, but thankfully, the protective clothing was holding out. They set the net as best they could while being pummelled by frantic, ravenous bats. Thousands upon thousands of them piled into the trap, colliding into one another, a hundred deep at least. It was an excellent catch if they could just keep them in the net. Special cords were pulled in at the edges until the net formed into a large ball, effectively snaring the wild agitated creatures. They had their food, it was just a matter of getting it back to the people.

Java and his team of brave men slowly and arduously dragged the net into the open. Other bats were still attacking, but as soon as they flew

into the open, they darted back into the cave. Clearly, they had an aversion to sunlight. Everyone was extremely pleased with themselves. Apart from a few minor bruises, no one was injured. The crude protective clothing had done its job perfectly.

No one knew what cooked bat tasted like, but how bad could it be? After all, it was fresh meat, so fresh in fact, that it was still very much alive and kicking. Most of the kingdom could hear the men approach with the engorged net. The bats screeched and wailed loud enough to wake the dead, but not for long, the whole net was dropped into the town's pond.

Immediately, the cooks set to work. On the menu would be bat soup, bat kebabs, bat nuggets, breast of bat, bat wings, bat strips, bat burgers, bat pate, bat balls and bat curry. As it happened, bat curry was the best option as bat meat had an unusual tang.

The coronation proceeded with all the expected pomp and ceremony. The crowning was performed in the open air, outside the main church. Then the royal wedding followed. Olwen and Miar were the bridesmaids, Larry gave the bride away and Lloyd was the best man. When all that was out of the way, the grand banquet began. The king's wine reserves flowed like water and everyone filled themselves up with bat – in various guises. Now it was time for the dragon display.

Everyone held their breaths as King Java blew the dragon horn. Previously, when Rosh did the same, nothing happened. Of course, there was a good reason for this – it turns out that he wasn't the firstborn after all. Nothing happened again, for a few moments, but then, suddenly, without warning, the skies exploded with dozens of specially preened dragons. Their polished scaly bodies and flat mirror-like wings reflected so much sunlight that the audience below were temporarily dazzled – sunglasses had yet to be invented. The first flypast was the classic arrow formation with nine of the largest dragons. Then, nine of the smaller dragons did a double loop, almost touching the ground and then touching the clouds. Two very energetic young dragons performed a perfect vertical flight, reaching so high in the sky that they almost disappeared. Finally, several teams of dragons approached each other from all points around the kingdom and weaved in and out of each other. So perfect was the choreography that not a wing touched. This amazing display went on for a good fifteen minutes, but it seemed much shorter. The people were completely agog with the spectacle, applauding loudly and cheering throughout.

The Kingdom was saved.

It was a day the people of the Kingdom would never forget. For a lifetime they had lived with subjugation and cruelty under King Worgin. Now it was the dawn of a new age with a new, good king.

Everyone was exceedingly happy.

26. Java the immortal

For many weeks previously, Java had suffered from an inner torment. It was a kind of anxiety that could not be explained. It manifested as a desperate compulsion to return to the kingdom. Somehow, the land of the dragons was calling out, communicating by unknown means. Without the true king, the kingdom and the dragons would have eventually perished. It was a cry of desperation by forces beyond the understanding of mere mortals.

Now Java was at ease, his inner torment had gone. He was content, happy, and married. Now he was truly home. The Netherworld had sufficed for many years, but it was not, by any stretch of the imagination, like the Kingdom. His home was always the kingdom, nowhere else. He could easily cope without technology and the digital age. These were things the kingdom would never desire. What he couldn't cope without was a sense of belonging.

Finally, he could sleep with an untroubled mind.

The next morning, he woke with his queen by his side. She remained still. He eased himself out of bed so as not to wake her. He peered out of the castle window overlooking the idyllic kingdom. To add to his mood, it happened to be a beautiful warm sunny day. The dragons had evidently completed their work. It was now a constant 21 degrees centigrade. It had to be early as no one was stirring, all was silent in the streets below. He dressed and quietly left the royal bedroom. Strangely, there were no guards to be seen. He ventured out onto the courtyard and across the drawbridge. Everywhere was peaceful and quiet. He had never seen the Kingdom so still, so deserted. Clearly, everyone was sleeping off the heavy night before. He was curious as to what time it was, obviously very early. He glanced at the church clock – it showed nine o'clock. 'That can't be right,' he thought. Then he saw someone slumped over a stone wall. He was asleep – how could he be asleep in such an uncomfortable position? Java shook him, he fell clumsily to the ground. Quickly, Java realised that he wasn't breathing, his body was cold – he was dead. He walked into the town square, another person was motionless on the ground, he wasn't

breathing either, he was stone cold – he was dead, too. In a blind, desperate panic, he ran back to the castle, up the stairs and into the royal bedroom. Delyth, the queen, was still sleeping, but she wasn't, her body was cold. He shook her and shouted at her, but she didn't stir. Finally, he was forced to check if she was breathing.

This was the worst moment of Java's life. It surpassed the horror of the dungeon, the banishment and the death of his first wife and daughter. Now, after just one wonderful night, Delyth, his queen had been taken from him. Eventually, he gathered enough strength to visit his daughter. He knocked on her bedroom door, but there was no reply. The door was unlocked. He entered with a heavy heart. Jennifer and Larry were motionless on the bed, not asleep but completely lifeless. Their bodies were also stone cold.

He ran through the streets aimlessly and out of breath. The only people he saw were dead. Everyone in the kingdom was dead. How? Why was he spared but no one else? The reason was obvious, he was the Dragon King and everyone else was a vulnerable mortal. And then it dawned, a horrible icy chill shot down his back – the bat meat. There was a clear warning, it had a distinctive tang to its taste, but no one thought to test it, to see if it was edible. The bat meat was poisonous and it was completely Java's fault, he had suggested snaring the bats for food.

Java sank deeply into despair, there was only one thing to do. He wanted to be with his people, Delyth and his daughter in the Marutuk afterworld. He took out his knife, checked to see if it was still sharp and braced himself.

'Wake up sleepy head,' said Delyth. 'Your snoring could wake the devil.'

It was an awful dream, the worst kind, but now, more than ever, Java appreciated his wonderful life.

27. Farewell

Java was fully aware that very shortly, his daughter would have to leave the kingdom and return home. Never seeing his Netherworld family again was a heavy price he had to pay. After a wonderful week in the Kingdom, better than any package holiday, Jennifer had to make the call.

'Dad, your Majesty, I think it's time we thought about going home.'

'Yes, yes, of course, I'll arrange it,' said Java, reservedly.

There were two ways to leave this kingdom – well, three actually, if you count the dark dank, five-mile tunnel, full of hungry flesh-eating creatures. Java could instruct Dirchef the dragon to drop them off at the top of the mountain range as he had done with Wurtherly's men. They would then have several miles of deep snow to trudge through, in bitingly cold temperatures, before they reached the military border patrol.

Or preferably, they could reconstruct a hot air balloon.

It was perfectly doable. There was enough unburnt nylon material remaining from the six balloons to make one good balloon. It would be one massive patchwork quilt, but that's what the people of the kingdom were good at – make do and mend. With foresight, Java had ensured that one basket remained specifically for this purpose. There was also no shortage of burners and gas bottles to fill the balloon with hot air. Dozens of the kingdom's people immediately set to work with their scissors, needles and thread and began the mammoth task of making an eighty-feet-tall balloon. With so many people working round-the-clock, two days later, it was completely finished.

It was a sad day. Farewells are always sad, but this was a very long, perhaps, forever, farewell. For once, Larry knew exactly what he was doing. He had previously spent many hours in a hot air balloon – he was a pilot after all. The burners roared away, behaving just like dragon's mouths, filling the patched-up balloon with hot air. Lethargically, the balloon stirred and began to slowly rise off the ground. Minutes later, it had formed its expected balloon shape. It was

nearly time.

It had to be a private farewell. The King didn't want his subjects to see tears in his eyes.

Returning to the Kingdom had been a wonderful adventure although, there's no denying that it hadn't been without its challenges. Java knew he owed everything to his family and friend. Without them, despite his special abilities, the journey wouldn't have been possible.

Larry, the once whinging son-in-law was now confident and forbearing. Lloyd, his guide, had been indispensable with his invaluable knowledge and wisdom. Finally, Jennifer, his daughter had truly been a godsend, always keeping a sense of levelheadedness during their predicaments.

Java had a gift for Jennifer: a baby dragon tusk.

'They lose these in their early years. I have the other one of the pair. No matter what distance they are parted, they are linked, sort-of telepathically,' explained Java.

'What, we can communicate!?' Jennifer enthused.

'In a way. When you hold it, you will sense my feelings, my emotions. When I hold mine, I will sense yours. So, make sure you hold it regularly!' insisted Java.

'I will, every day,' said Jennifer.

'Oh, and one more thing: Lloyd, I have a big favour to ask, would you teach Tegan and Caron, the Welsh language? You never know, it may come in handy one day.'

'I would be honoured to,' said Lloyd, fully appreciating that he was now talking to a fully-fledged King.

'Better be going, the wind direction is perfect at the moment,' said Larry.

'Look after them,' said Java.

'I'll do my best, I have always tried to,' said Larry.

Jennifer, Larry and Lloyd climbed into the basket. The balloon was now taut and eager to ascend. Java untied the holding ropes and Larry tugged the lever, giving another burst on the burner. The basket lethargically parted from the ground as the balloon steadily floated upwards and sidewards, with the wind direction. It was an unhurried form of air transport, encouraging a prolonged session of waving and blowing kisses. However, it wasn't long before the occupants of the

basket were barely visible. The balloon now had enough height to clear the mountain range as it drifted eastwards.

Now, almost out of sight, it was time for Java to summon Dirchef. He blew his horn four times. Moments later, the King's dragon approached with his huge powerful wings disturbing the stillness of the air. He landed heavily right next to Java, shaking the ground like an earth tremor.

'Follow them and make sure they're alright,' he whispered in the dragon's ear.

Dirchef gave one of his rare, disgruntled looks. It was a big ask. His master was asking him to fly far beyond the boundary of the kingdom.

The climate of the Kingdom was *now*, calm and temperate, but this was always deceiving. As soon as the balloon proceeded past the mountain peaks into the high ground, the weather dramatically changed. The winds picked up and storms mercilessly pelted the thin fabric of the balloon. There was nothing Larry could do, the balloon increased in speed and the buffeting tossed the basket around like a leaf in a leaf blower. They were going far too fast to land – the prospects were looking grim. There was no way around it, they would have to crash land, but with the speed, the balloon was travelling, their prospects were grim.

Suddenly, the basket jolted to and fro and then steadied. To their horror, they noticed that the material of the balloon had suddenly slackened. The balloon was rapidly deflating but there was no sensation of falling. Glancing up inside the balloon, the reason became clear. Huge talons had torn through the upper fabric and were supporting the balloon. In another time and another place, the sight of this would have been terrifying but instantly they knew they were in safe hands – talons.

A smooth, controlled descent, brought them safely down to ground level, right next to a small, familiar wooden chalet. Pablo came running out and then froze in his tracks. He couldn't move, he couldn't speak, he just stared at Dirchef now unhooking his talons from the fabric.

'What's up, Pablo? Never seen a dragon before?' said Jennifer as she calmly climbed out of the basket onto firm wonderful ground.

Somehow, Jennifer had to get a message back to her father, she knew he'd be concerned. Any journey in or out of the kingdom was always potentially perilous. She had to act quickly, Dirchef was about to head back into the mountains. It was extremely doubtful if Pablo had a large piece of paper and a marker pen.

‘Dirchef wait!’ yelled Jennifer.

Surprisingly enough, the huge dragon took notice and lingered in the air causing a great deal of air turbulence. With a large stone, she quickly wrote a message in the snow:

OK PABLOS

‘Dirchef, remember these words. Take this message to Java,’ she yelled, doubting if Dirchef could comprehend any part of her request.

For a few moments, Dirchef stared at the symbols, for that’s all they were to him. The enormous dragon then blew a little fire out of his nose and launched himself, rapidly into the sky.

28. Dragon know-how

Life in the Marutuk Kingdom slowly but surely returned to normal. Promoted by the warmer climate, crops and fruit grew quickly and cattle reproduced in abundance. The people grew a liking to bat meat, therefore 'the gathering of the bats' became a regular event. Happiness and contentment finally returned to the kingdom after a lifetime of cruel oppression. The new King and Queen couldn't be happier, especially in their new rightful home – the spacious fantasy castle. Let it not be said that Java was in any way spiteful. He made sure that his brother and mother were adequately accommodated in a small, open-plan (one-room) townhouse with absolutely no servants, maids, guards or cooks. To some extent, his brother and mother could be forgiven for their ways. The former king had a lot to answer for. Rosh had been indoctrinated by him and his mother had been forced to absorb his evilness. However, there can be no excuse for being weak-minded. The blacksmith and his wife, Dalkus and Junie, moved into the unoccupied west wing of the castle along with their granddaughter. It was the least Java could do.

Despite the technology ban, King Java saw no reason why he shouldn't introduce a few harmless improvements to his kingdom. With free-flowing water from the mountains, an elaborate water feature in the town square was simply a must. To make this happen, somehow, very long pipes had to be fabricated. Once they overcame this small hurdle, pipes paved the way for many more innovations such as flushing toilets, cold running water and irrigation.

The King quickly began to realise that the kingdom lacked certain commodities, like cotton, paper, tea, coffee, various metals chemicals and medicines. Without these things, mainly coffee, there was only so far that the kingdom could move on. Stop rampant technology, yes, but surely, a little bit of progress was never a bad thing.

When Dirchef returned from his mission, to the King's annoyance, he burnt a series of symbols in the perfectly manicured lawn of the town's bowling green. What was especially annoying was that the lawn had been prepared using no more than elbow grease and garden

shears – the lawnmower had yet to be invented. For many weeks, no one knew what the marks meant, but Java loved a mystery. Eventually, he decided to copy the symbols onto parchment.

O I< I> ˆ I3 I_ 0

What if the symbols are letters, he thought? The first two would clearly be OK. The next symbol vaguely resembles a ‘P’. The next possibly an ‘A’, then ‘B’, ‘L’, ‘O’. It was so obvious – ‘OK PABLO’ staring everyone in the face. It was a simple message sent by Jennifer. She had obviously reached Pablo’s cabin and was OK. Dirchef’s intelligence had been massively underestimated. He could do a lot more than just fly about and set fire to things. This opened up all kinds of possibilities – but one in particular.

King Java chose his best Knight, Arawn – the strongest and most fearless of all his men. Arawn knew precisely what he had to do. The people of the kingdom wove a large basket and King Java wrote out a large shopping list. It was a list of all the things the kingdom needed, but couldn’t source themselves. Much bigger kingdoms/countries called it imports, the Marutukians humbly called it supplies. It was to be a risky mission, not only for Arawn but for Dirchef. He was no spring chicken of a dragon anymore. A crowd gathered to say farewell. Venturing boldly, into the perilous Netherworld, many people doubted if they would see either of them again. No matter, Arawn… and Dirchef were fearless.

In no time, dragon Dirchef, carrying the basket containing Arawn, had cleared the mountaintops. A few more moments and they were completely out of sight. Once more, Dirchef was going beyond the technology barrier, beyond the outermost reaches of the Kingdom. This time he was heading straight for the military exclusion zone. Eventually, a border patrol was spotted in the distance.

Dirchef began his descent, down to the snow-covered rocks below. Arawn was unprepared for the bitter cold of the wilderness. His clothes were barely adequate for a mild breeze. The ground approached rapidly, closing in on a small cabin with a collection of aerials and a satellite dish on the roof. One thing that dragons cannot do is fly quietly. The thunder of their wings, thrashing at the icy-cold air, alerted the entire complement of guards – all two of them. Naturally, seeing an enormous unearthly dragon heading towards them, they overreacted. They were equipped with rifles, but the bullets would barely dent the dragon's skin. However, Arawn’s flesh was not so invulnerable. As Dirchef finished off his landing procedure, a couple of rogue bullets passed through the basket into Arawn’s leg

and shoulder. This was definitely something he hadn't anticipated. Before he could scream out with the terrific pain, he passed out.

The dragon lay there, motionless and outwardly untroubled with the basket containing wounded Arawn by his side. The two soldiers gingerly approached the dragon. Fortunately, Dirchef made no attempt to incinerate or eat them. They both rubbed their eyes – it really was a dragon. They'd heard the tales, they vaguely knew why they were there in a godforsaken place in the middle of nowhere, but they could never be prepared for what they were now witnessing.

'You keep an eye on… *it*, while I go and speak to the sergeant,' said one of the soldiers.

'And do what exactly, if it starts playing up?' said the other soldier.

'Run!'

The first soldier returned to the lookout cabin leaving the other soldier, trembling but edging, ever-so-slightly towards the basket.

'Sarge, you're not going to believe this. An enormous dragon has just landed right next to the cabin,'

'Say again, just sounded like you said a dragon has landed next to your cabin.'

'Affirmative!'

'Yes, yes, very amusing. What do you want!?' bawled the sergeant, coming through loudly, on the two-way radio.

'No Sarge, really, a huge dragon! It was carrying a basket with a man inside it.'

'Oh… right. Is the man alright?'

'We had no choice, we opened fire. I think he's dead.'

'Think!? Have you looked?'

At that moment, the other soldier burst into the cabin.

'The man's stirring, but he's lost a lot of blood,' said the other soldier.

'Stay put, I'm coming over… with a medic!' said the sergeant.

Dirchef patiently waited on the freezing, snow-covered ground. Somehow, he knew there was little he could do but wait. He sensed his passenger was still alive, therefore, he was obliged to stay, no matter what. Thirty minutes later, the beating noise of a helicopter added to the howling winds. A rather large helicopter landed on a flat escarpment close to the border patrol. Dirchef continued to remain

motionless as several soldiers and a couple of medics disembarked and walked over to him. Naturally, they were all dumbstruck at the sight of a real dragon, but they had a job to do. The two brave medics, a man and a woman, approached Dirchef. The female medic doubted very much if she would be understood by a genuine, fire-breathing dragon, but she spoke anyway.

'Nice dragon, we need to take the man into the cabin to make him better,' she said, patronisingly.

Dirchef nodded.

'It's just nodded!' gasped the male medic.

'Probably just a nervous twitch.'

More soldiers bravely approached the dragon and lifted Arawn out of the basket and took him inside the cabin. He was justifiably whimpering in pain. The medics knew exactly how to deal with bullet wounds, that was their forte.

After a while, the bullets had been removed, the wounds stitched and bandaged and Arawn had enough morphine in his body to keep any pain away for a week. He sat up, awkwardly.

'You should be alright now. Your wounds will smart a bit for a few weeks. Fortunately, though, no serious damage done,' consoled the female medic.

Unfortunately, Arawn only spoke ancient Welsh. He had no idea what she or for that matter, any of the soldiers were saying. He just nodded when it seemed the right thing to do.

'What - is - your - name?' asked the female medic.

Arawn shrugged his shoulders.

'Me - Jessica,' said the medic, pointing at herself, 'what - is - your - name?' she said slowly and clearly, pointing at Arawn.

'Arawn!' he sparked.

It now seemed the right moment to produce King Java's list. The sergeant studied it – conveniently, it was in English.

'Hmm, take a while to put this little lot together.'

Moments later, the sergeant gave Arawn another note, it said:

"Come back in four days. Sorry about Arawn, we overreacted."

Finally, Arawn hobbled out of the cabin and with a lot of help from the soldiers, proceeded to climb into the basket. Dirchef had waited

patiently for over four hours in the bitter cold.

The noble dragon tried his best to take off but there wasn't enough lift in his wings. They were frozen rigid. He attempted to use his flame breath to defrost his wings, but he couldn't do that either.

A little bit of dragon know-how: Their wings are not like bird's wings, they use a different principle to fly, very much like a bat. Their wings have to be pliant enough to create a wave effect for lift.

One of the soldiers instantly recognised the problem. He happened to know all about bats and their principles of flight.

'Its wings are frozen. We need to defrost them!' he yelled above the howling wind.

'Do you think the snow-melter will damage its wings?' yelled another soldier.

'Wouldn't think so, worth a try. As I see it, it's the only option,' yelled the bat expert.

Minutes later, the snow-melter was set up and blasting searingly hot flames at Dirchef's enormous wings. Ordinarily, the fierce flames of the snow-melter would cremate living tissue, but dragons were made differently.

'There, that should do,' yelled the bat expert.

Everyone stood back and let Dirchef try again. This time, after a few thunderous flaps of his wings, he began to rise off the ground. It was a tremendous effort, but eventually, he gained enough height to begin the journey home.

29. Imports

Arawn and Dirchef return home to a hero's welcome.

Arawn quickly recovered from his bullet wounds, but Dirchef never fully recovered. The extreme cold and the return flight had taken their toll. When a dragon comes to the end of its life, it happens very quickly. Dirchef was very old, believed to be approaching his centenary. Perhaps a younger dragon should have taken Arawn into the Netherworld, but Dirchef was *almost* human and utterly dependable. No other dragon was suited for the task. A replacement would be hard to find.

Regardless, another dragon would have to be selected. This would be Dirchef's last duty to perform.

Dirchef chose Brathen. Although female this time, she was one of the largest and most powerful of all the dragons. She would become the King's dragon and therefore, head of all the dragons. Her first task was to go into the Netherworld and collect the supplies. In retrospect, King Java felt guilty about sending Arawn on such a hazardous mission, he regretted that he hadn't gone himself. He was accustomed to the Netherworld people, he could speak their language and mostly understood their distinctive, often unpredictable behaviour. Delyth was unhappy about Java going alone, especially with a new, inexperienced dragon taking him. However, she shouldn't have worried, Dirchef had chosen well.

The same border patrol rapidly approached. Fortunately, this time, no weapons were fired. The soldiers were prepared for the visit. However, the spectacle of a proper fire-breathing dragon, the size of an aircraft, landing right next to them would never be commonplace. The soldiers hung on tightly to whatever was around them as the tremendous turbulence attempted to push them off their feet. Once the air had calmed, Java got out of the basket and greeted everyone.

'Got everything you asked for except for Marmite. It seems to be in short supply,' said the sergeant.

'Thank you. I hope this will cover the costs and your trouble,' said

Java as he handed them a small piece of pure gold, the size of a soap bar.

‘I would imagine so. Don’t ask me for change though,’ chuckled the sergeant.

‘Would there be any problem doing this on a regular basis?’ asked Java.

‘No, no, not at all!’ said the Sergeant, staring deeply into the gold bar.

Just at that moment, Brathen stirred. She had spotted a soldier taking several photos of her, with his mobile phone. It was the ‘flash’ more than anything, that irritated her. Spontaneously she started to roar loudly and then her breath ignited.

‘Cool it girl, cool it!’ Java shouted across to her, but it was too late.

The intense flames had already begun to shoot out of her nose. Java ran across to position himself in between the dragon and the soldier. He held both his hands up to deflect the flames. The soldier was protected, but the flames spread everywhere. Anything that could burn, burnt. Fortunately, there was a lot of snow around to smother the many fires. By now, Brathen had calmed herself and extinguished her breath. She really would have to learn to restrain herself in future encounters. Thanks to Java’s quick reaction, the soldier had come off lightly. Much of his trousers and jacket were singed, but the heat had not penetrated his thermal clothing.

‘Johnson, what the hell do you think you’re doing!’ bawled the sergeant.

The sergeant snatched the mobile phone from him and threw it hard, against a rock, it shattered into several pieces.

‘Oh, Sarge, that was an iPhone sixteen, I’ve only just had it!’ bleated Johnson.

The soldier seemed to be completely unaware of the seriousness of the matter and most importantly, that Java had just saved his life.

‘You’re on report, soldier! Be thankful you’re not barbequed!’ bawled the sergeant again.

He now turned to Java.

‘Are you OK, your hands?’

‘They’re fine,’ said Java calmly, holding them up to demonstrate.

It was immediately obvious that there was something very unusual about Java. His hands should have been burnt to a crisp, but they

were completely untouched. The sergeant had to accept that when it came to dragons and secret kingdoms, there were bound to be many things that defied any explanation.

The soldiers, along with humbled Johnson, loaded up the very large basket, with all the supplies.

‘Brathen will come on her own from now on. Don’t wind her up and you’ll be fine,’ said Java as he squeezed in amongst the boxes of tea, coffee, cement and other various materials.

Brathen gave a rankled look that said it all. Already, she was showing her distinct personality traits.

A week after Dirchef had returned from the Netherworld, he died. It was a very, very sad day. The whole Kingdom was in mourning. Dragons happened to be dying all the time and new eggs hatching to replace them, but Dirchef was one of a kind. He had touched the hearts of many with his mellowed ways and his often prim and proper attitude toward humans.

A dragon funeral was not a thing the Marutuk people usually got involved with, but Dirchef would be an exception. The problem with dragons is that they can’t be destroyed even when dead. They won’t burn, they don’t decompose and they’re far too big to bury. However, this never posed a problem as every single part of a dragon is beneficial: Their skin is tougher than Kevlar, their bones stronger than tungsten, their eyes contain diamonds, their blood is rich in gold, their tears are magical – and so it goes on. Dirchef would eventually receive the same fate as all the rest: he would be dissected, dismembered and basically pulled apart, but first, he would have respect and a period of grieving.

30. Cultured Kingdom

The years smoothly passed by and the King steadily aged, as did his queen. Many new little souls were born, strangely, never ever twins and the dragons ate the deceased. It was the way of the kingdom. Graveyards were no more than a collection of small memorial stones. Of course, King Java had lived through thirty-six years of burials and cremations in the Netherworld. This seemed a lot more civilised than dragons feasting on the recently dead. However, there were certain advantages to this Marutuk arrangement. Firstly, the dragons got regularly fed, secondly, it was a convenient way to dispose of the bodies and thirdly, a Marutuk funeral could never be described as a dull affair. Occasionally there were exceptions. When Queen Mererid (Java's mother) died, her flesh was so sour with evilness that the dragons couldn't stomach it. There was no option, she *had to* be cremated, but this procedure was extremely rare.

King Java improved the Kingdom to no end. Everyone had work to do, which kept the people occupied and contented. The regular supplies eased the burden of self-sufficiency – something often difficult to achieve. The kingdom became almost like a holiday resort, but it had one vital thing missing – a sandy beach, so, the people of the kingdom made one. Water from the mountains was dammed to form a small waterfront and sand was excavated in massive quantities to form a shore. They had created paradise, even if they didn't always appreciate it.

Java quickly realised that the kingdom was sadly lacking in culture. This was something that there was an abundance of in the Netherworld. The people of the kingdom were brought up to believe that culture was of the devil's making. This was something that Java had to redress. Music existed in a basic form: mostly horns, whistles and drums. It was hard to get your hips swinging with so few instruments. Art was limited to basic carvings in stone and wood, definitely not worth displaying in an exhibition. Literature and poetry simply didn't exist.

As soon as there was space in the "imports" basket, Java requested

violins, guitars, flutes and trumpets. The following basket provided canvas, paints, writing paper and pens. It took a while for innate talent to surface, but within five years, the Kingdom enjoyed a plethora of cultural events. They included art exhibitions, musical recitals, dance nights and poetry readings. Even a small library was opened. Culture kept the people amused and happy, but most of all expanded their minds.

The baby dragon tusks were used extensively over the years. When King Java held his one of the pair, he experienced the emotions of whoever had last held the other one in the Netherworld. He experienced the woes, the stresses and the many joys of his cherished family which he had been forced to relinquish. He sensed his grandchildren, Tegan and Caron, growing up, with their endless plights – mainly associated with adolescence. He sensed his daughter going through her midlife crisis. All Java ever passed back to them was the happiness and contentment of his now perfect life.

Now, this story of dragons, magical kingdoms and kings could feasibly end at this point without too much disappointment. However, the banishment of Java set in motion a train of unusual events. Up until that point, all the heirs to the throne had been born in the kingdom and lived their entire lives in the kingdom.

Java had spread his seed into the Netherworld.

Java's successor to the throne should have been his first-born daughter, Gabrielle. Sadly, she was killed, along with her mother, in a car crash in Vancouver. Jennifer survived, but even though she was her twin sister, she was not the firstborn. The throne, therefore, was passed on to her children: Tegan and Caron. They happened to be born by caesarean which meant they were born virtually at the same time. As this form of childbirth was unprecedented in the Kingdom, no one was really sure of the outcome. Either one could be the rightful heir to the throne. Until the moment arrived, there was no way of knowing who it would be.

31. Two-timing

Several years later…

There was a knock on the door. On the previous occasion, some time back, Jennifer had answered the door. This time, Larry happened to be the one to open the door. Two white-cloaked men and an aged white-cloaked woman were standing on the doorstep.

‘I am Chandrella of Musokin,’ said the woman.

‘Who is it, love?’ shouted Jennifer from upstairs.

‘Trick or treating, I think. Cinderella of music, or something,’ shouted Larry, back.

Jennifer instantly knew who it was. It may have been twenty years ago, but a name like that, she could never forget. She raced downstairs as fast as her creaking knees would allow.

‘Hello Jennifer, nice to see you again,’ said the old woman.

‘Very good, aren’t they,’ said Larry.

Jennifer knew instantly, that an appearance of the Protectorate had to be taken very seriously. She had to quickly explain a few things to Larry before he made a complete fool of himself.

‘Larry, sweetheart, this is Chandrella, head of the Protectorate. She is descended from an ancient king… King Hebrew?’ said Jennifer.

‘Close, Debrux, but well remembered,’ said the old woman.

‘This is excellent. Have you been rehearsing this?’ asked Larry.

‘Am I allowed to tell him?’ asked Jennifer.

The old woman nodded.

‘These people are from the Protectorate. A society to protect the dragons. We met many years ago while Dad was here.’

‘Oh, right, very good… Are you sure you’re not trick-or-treating? You do look the part? said Larry.

‘Larry, you’ve dug yourself a hole, careful you don’t fall into it. I take it, your appearance indicates something serious is happening in the kingdom?’ suggested Jennifer.

‘I’m sorry to say, your father is dying.’

‘I haven’t detected that with the tusk. He seems perfectly happy,’ argued Jennifer.

‘He may be happy, but that doesn’t alter the fact that he is coming to the end of his life,’ said the old lady.

‘Anyway, how come you know all this?’ asked Larry.

‘Look, do you mind if we come in and I’ll tell you all you want to know,’ said Chandrella.

Minutes later, Jennifer had poured five strong coffees and filled a plate with biscuits. The visitors made themselves comfortable around the coffee table. It was time for Chandrella to explain a few things. Larry was all ears – Jennifer had heard most of it before.

‘As your wife knows, I am directly descended from the ancient King Debrux. He was the high king and protector of all the dragons. This responsibility has been passed down through countless generations. At the time of the dragon relocation, a man named Marutuk stole the dragon horn. He deviously used dragon tears to unite himself with the dragons. With Marutuk’s control over the dragons, he became ruler of the kingdom. His descendants continued throughout the centuries, to follow in his footsteps.’

‘You’re saying, my wife and our children are the descendants of a thief?’ suggested Larry.

‘To put it bluntly, yes, but it will always remain our responsibility to protect the dragons, whatever happens in the kingdom. Because of Marutuk’s original actions, it is vitally important that we keep his family line intact and on the throne or the dragons will all perish,’ said the old lady as she slowly sipped her coffee.

‘Yes, but you haven’t explained how you know that Java is dying,’ niggled Larry.

‘Let’s just say, I have a connection. Are your daughters still living here?’ asked Chandrella.

‘You must be joking, left the nest years ago, thank goodness. Tegan *was* married, had twin boys, got divorced and is now engaged again. Caron has a new boyfriend. She seems to be pretty keen on him,’ said Jennifer.

‘Oh dear… new boyfriend. That complicates matters slightly,’ said Chandrella.

‘What matters does it complicate?’ asked Jennifer.

‘Did Lloyd teach them the Welsh language?’ asked Chandrella, ignoring Jennifer’s question.

‘Yes, he did a good job, they’re quite fluent,’ said Larry, proudly.

‘What matters does it complicate?!’ repeated Jennifer, louder.

‘Tegan and Caron are your father’s successors. When he dies, one of them will become queen of the Kingdom and will have to spend the rest of their lives there,’ explained Chandrella.

‘Not possible! They have an established life here now. They have partners… and children… and we’ll never see them again,’ babbled Jennifer.

‘I’m really sorry. I thought you understood the situation. This should have been explained to you,’ apologised Chandrella.

‘We will all have to go then, and live there! All eight of us. That’s the only solution,’ said Jennifer in a frenzy.

‘Darling, you’re getting upset. You know that can’t happen. What about *my* family and all our friends? We can’t just leave everyone behind,’ insisted Larry.

‘Well, apparently Tegan and Caron will have to!’ hissed Jennifer.

‘Is Caron’s relationship serious?’ asked Chandrella, calmly.

‘Who knows these days… Why, what are you getting at?’ snapped Jennifer.

‘Nothing, nothing to worry about,’ said Chandrella.

‘Nothing to worry about? Our daughters are going to leave us… forever, and that’s nothing to worry about?’ fretted Jennifer.

‘We will call on you again in a week’s time. Please ensure all your family are present. I will contact you in due course. Remember as few people as possible must know about the Kingdom. As on your previous journey, a guide will be provided as well as transport. You must decide if you are to accompany your daughters,’ said Chandrella.

‘Transport?’ quizzed Larry brightly.

‘Yes, we are now collaborating with the military to a limited degree. They have agreed to offer transport to a border patrol,’ said Chandrella, avoiding a precise explanation of the transport

arrangements.

There was no more to say. Chandrella and her two associates left as mysteriously as they arrived – but blended in well with the trick-or-treaters.

It was a tall order for Jennifer and Larry to explain the full daunting facts to their daughters, so they didn't. They thought it best to leave it to the Protectorate when they next visited. The extended family was invited over for a get-together, they were told. It was important – more important than they could possibly imagine.

It was a rare event to get the whole family together, it didn't even happen at Christmas time. Jennifer, Larry, Tegan with her partner Gareth and Caron with her partner Roger, filled all the available seating in the lounge. The twin boys were in bed upstairs, asleep – hopefully.

The arranged time the Protectorate should have arrived came and went. A whole hour passed before anything significant happened and then Tegan's partner, Gareth, had something significant to say.

'Thanks for coming everyone. This may come as a bit of a shock, but as well as Tegan's Fiancé, I also happen to be your guide, provided by the Protectorate,' said Gareth nervously.

'You've got to be kidding!' sparked Jennifer.

'What do you mean, guide? Gareth, you're scaring me, we're supposed to be getting married. I thought you loved me?' fretted Tegan.

'Course I love you, petal. About six months now since the Protectorate contacted me. They did a background check on me. Apparently, I ticked all the boxes. They've trained me to be your guide into the Kingdom,' said Gareth, gaining confidence by the second.

'I don't think ticking all the boxes was anything to do with their decision,' said Larry, cynically.

'Hang on, hang on! Protectorate? Kingdom? What the hell is all this about,' ranted Caron.

'Surely you haven't forgotten the stories your grandpa told you when you were little?' said Larry/Dad.

'No, of course, I haven't, but they were just stories,' snapped Caron.

'Anyway, must press on, lots of things to discuss, but before I go any further, there is an important matter that needs resolving. Some background checks have been done. I have a few photos to pass around,' said Gareth.

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and brought out several photographs and began handing them out – firstly to Caron.

‘As you can see, this is Roger, Caron’s partner, being greeted at the door by a young lady…’

Gareth continued to hand out the photos.

‘Oh yes, Roger again in a café with the same young lady…’

‘This is inside the young lady’s home… A framed picture of Roger and the young lady…

‘Another picture… Can’t work out what they’re doing there…’

‘Ah, a nice closeup of the young lady. She was very obliging. I told her I was doing some background checks on Roger – which, of course, was no lie.’

‘More photos of them together…’

At first, Caron was distraught. The humiliation and inevitable anger would take a few moments to kick in. The photographs clearly showed that her partner, Roger, was two-timing her. He had another woman he was seeing regularly and not particularly hiding the fact, either.

‘I believe that Roger is using you as free board and lodgings,’ concluded Gareth.

‘Alright, so what, I was going off you, anyway!’ said Roger, snidely.

Roger was guilty as charged. He had absolutely nothing to say in his defence. He was two-timing Caron, the proof was in full colour. When he was supposed to be at work, he was with another woman. When he was supposed to be down at the pub with his mates, he was with this other woman. When he was supposed to be at the gym, he wasn’t. He was using Caron – taking advantage of her kind and somewhat gullible nature. He stood up, threw his (Caron’s) house keys on the table and left without a word. Caron was in tears, not inconsolable, but upset all the same. Jennifer went over to her and hugged her tightly. After all, she would always be her little darling and hated it when either of her daughters was upset.

‘Sorry, but I had to get that little matter out of the way before more confidential matters are discussed,’ said Gareth.

‘Little matter!’ fumed Caron.

‘You should thank Gareth. You’ve had a lucky escape. Anyway, moving on, how come Lloyd isn’t the guide this time?’ asked Larry.

‘The Protectorate may not have fully explained, but this is a one-way

trip. Whoever decides to go will be staying forever in the Kingdom. Lloyd was not too keen about that,' said Gareth.

'Staying… forever… in the Kingdom? Mum, what's going on!?' ranted Tegan and Caron, more or less together.

Saying the same thing was an identical-twins trait, even though they now lived apart and were in their late twenties. Perhaps, on closer inspection, their hairstyles were slightly different, but they always tended to wear the same style of clothes, same makeup and had the same mannerisms.

Gareth took it upon himself to tell the whole abridged story just in case they had forgotten what their grandpa told them over twenty years ago.

It took a while for Caron and Tegan to accept the thought of leaving their possessions, their homes, their furniture, their mobile phones and the majority of their clothes behind – forever. However, there was one consolation: they would be seeing grandpa again.

32. A cramped experience

Checking in at the airport was a strange affair. No one had cases, just a small amount of hand luggage and a double buggy for the toddlers. Normally Jennifer used up all her weight allowance plus much of Larry's. This time, it certainly wasn't the case. They had literally walked out of their civilised life and left everything behind. They hadn't even bothered to turn the gas and electricity off. What was the point? They would never be returning. Perhaps they should have sold their homes, their possessions, their cars, but it was all too much trouble.

Eventually, they landed at Buenos Aires airport where they were met by a handful of military personnel. In keeping with their austere profession, they marched them swiftly to another waiting plane. The tiny wheels on the buggy had never turned so fast.

This time there were no in-flight meals, no comfy seats and no flight attendants. It was a noisy, rattly, uncomfortable, six-hundred-mile flight. They landed in the middle of nowhere, where a helicopter was patiently waiting.

The cold and draughty helicopter took them directly over the hostile mountain peaks and landed near a small border patrol. It happened to be the same border patrol where the kingdom's supplies were collected from – where Dragon Brathen had almost incinerated a soldier and Arawn was shot at. It was pretty obvious how they were going to be transported from there into the kingdom, although, only Gareth had an inkling of what was to come.

Gareth, Jennifer, Larry, Tegan and Caron with her twin boys clambered out of the helicopter with very little help from the aircrew. It was far too cold for them to be courteous and accommodating. Trudging their way through the deep snow to the Cabin was an endurance, in itself. The buggy was less than useless so it was abandoned. As soon as they had all distanced themselves from the rotor blades, the helicopter took off and rapidly headed back to civilisation.

The border patrol was never designed for so many people. They were forced to share the small cabin with two bewildered soldiers. Needless to say, it was a little crowded, but on the positive side, cosy and warm. Naturally, the twins were crying with hunger or tiredness, or because their nappies were full. Everyone else was also hungry, tired and longed for a toilet visit. The stackable plastic chairs were not particularly comfortable either. None of this helped with the fraying tempers.

‘How long do we have to wait here?’ protested Larry.

The soldiers didn’t know so they couldn’t answer.

‘Shouldn’t be long… if the note was passed on successfully,’ said Gareth.

‘What do you mean, if, and successfully? I don’t fancy staying here for hours!’ growled Jennifer.

Just as Jennifer stopped grumbling, a sudden windstorm picked up and rattled the sides of the cabin. The soldiers nodded at each other. They knew exactly what was causing the windstorm. Soon their visitors would be gone and normality would be restored.

This was Dragon Brathen’s calling card – turbulence on a grand scale. A soldier peeked through the iced-up window and then beckoned everyone outside. Jennifer and Larry had seen it all before, but Tegan, Caron and Gareth were justifiably dumbstruck. To see a dragon for the first time, especially one the size of Brathen, was something you would never, ever forget.

It's a fact that once you’ve seen a real fire-breathing dragon, you’re not quite the same again. Somehow the sight of such a majestic, magical creature does things to your visual cortex, brain, or psyche and changes your perception forever.

Dragon Brathen was still relatively young and strong. She had enough energy to remain hovering while everyone climbed into the basket. This wasn’t easy with the downdraft from Brathen’s wings. Naturally, there we no pre-flight checks or safety briefings, as soon as the last leg was off the ground, the basket hurtled into the air like a fairground ride. Brathen was not one for hanging around.

The journey broke all barriers of discomfort. None of the party of seven, especially the toddlers, were prepared for the freezing temperatures. The petrifying wind chill factor and the motion sickness from the constant swaying of the basket were insufferable. It was Brathen’s basic instinct, to get back to the warm kingdom as quickly as possible. The twin boys continued to scream and wail, now, most

likely because of the cold. The others also wanted to scream and wail, but they were grown-ups and had to act accordingly. Fortunately, very quickly, they approached the mountain edge and then the Kingdom suddenly appeared below in the far distance. The clouds parted and warm air currents wafted past them.

Tegan and Caron had mostly recovered from their shock of seeing a dragon for the first time, the hair-raising flight and the unbelievable cold. Now, another emotion was coming into play: excitement and they were brimming over with it. The first thing they noticed were many more dragons circling in the sky, some distance away just as hawks or eagles would do. Then the full glory of the entire Marutuk Kingdom, spread out in its magnificence, appeared beneath them. They were quite simply spellbound. Moments later, they spotted people on the ground, no bigger than grains of rice. Slowly but surely, their perspective closed in on the small and quaint houses, the uneven cobbled streets, and then the magnificent, resplendent fairy castle came into view. It really was a sight for sore eyes, dominating the wonderful, peaceful kingdom. Brathen was heading for a spot on the ground where a group of people were gathered. One of them was in a primitive-looking wheelchair. Closer and closer they approached the people. They were dressed very differently from modern Netherworld people. Suddenly, Caron and Tegan recognised the person in the wheelchair.

‘Grandpa!!’ they both yelled.

‘Cathy, Tania!’ Java yelled back.

Brathen gently lowered the basket to the ground, let go of the ropes and swiftly returned to her cave in the mountainside.

33. A sad end

Finally, the whole family was together and complete: Grandpa, his daughter, both his granddaughters and both his great-grandsons. What began as a travesty, the banishment of the future King Java, had taken almost a lifetime to redress. The royal family of Marutuk was re-established, all evilness had gone and the dragons were now safe once more.

Grandpa, now known as King Java, was very poorly, his heart was failing him. Perhaps an illness easily treated in the Netherworld, but this was Marutuk, the Dragon Kingdom. The stethoscope hadn't even been invented yet. However, the illness didn't stop him from continuing to enjoy life.

Fortunately, the years had been kind to Delyth. She was Java's strength and always by his side. So often had he talked to her about Tegan and Caron, it was as though she knew them intimately, but in his recollections, they were always six years old. Conveniently, through some kind of magic, Delyth could still speak fluent English, so she was able to engage in conversation and warm up to everyone.

There was much for (King) Grandpa to show his reacquainted family, firstly, their new home – the castle. They would be living on the second and third floors. King Java now lived on the ground floor for obvious reasons. Then he took them on a tour of the town. The town centre water feature, the park, the shops and then a small trek to the beach. Yes, the kingdom now had its own beach, seashore, waves, parasols and deckchairs. It was as real as any seaside resort. The kingdom had everything anyone ever wanted, except for electricity, the internet, television, telephones, cars, washing machines, microwave ovens, fridges and freezers, electric lights, computers, and cameras, but they happily managed without any of these things.

Everyone comfortably settled in. Thanks to Lloyd, Tegan and Caron were reasonably fluent in speaking Welsh. He had done an excellent job with his tutoring

As is the way when you're a beautiful, young, unattached young lady,

it wasn't long before Caron had a strong admirer, his name happened to be Arawn – who happened to be the King's Knight. It was love at first sight. Apparently, this was a common occurrence in the Kingdom.

King Java looked back on his life: his childhood, the Netherworld, his family, the adventures, the kingdom and concluded he'd had a good one. There were, of course, the bad times: his period in the dungeon, the banishment and the death of his first wife and daughter, but for much of the time, he'd been happy. He accepted his life was now rapidly coming to an end but he had no regrets.

One morning Java failed to waken. It was the best way to go. No pain or suffering, just a dream that continued forever. For the people of Marutuk, he had been the best ruler, the kindest and most caring King the Kingdom had ever had.

Delyth was prepared for the day she would lose the love of her life. She had no complaints and no regrets. Java had returned to her, that's all that mattered. To have been the Queen to such a wonderful King, she considered herself the luckiest woman alive. Every day that they spent together was beyond precious and her memories of those times would never be allowed to fade.

The funeral was dragon-style. King Java was laid out on a bed of flowers for all to see. Everyone in the kingdom came to show their respect. This was a total contrast from the last king, where no one apart from Queen Mererid and Rosh, bothered to attend.

After three days, when all that remained was Java's empty, soulless body – his overcoat, the church bells rang out. This was Brathen's cue. Many people began to weep as the King's dragon swooped in and fetched her meal. This was always the way. Royalty would only be taken by the royal dragon.

34. Kingdom of Queens

It was time for a new ruler: Queen Tegan or Queen Caron. No one knew who it would be, not even their mother. Not until the coronation and the blowing of the magic horn, would the chosen one be revealed.

Events like coronations took a lot of preparation. Everyone, absolutely everyone got involved. It was something for the Kingdom's people to talk about and get involved in. It was also something to break the daily routine of living in a primitive paradise. Thanks to the import/export arrangement (supplies in, gold out) with the Netherworld, this coronation would be different. It would be the first celebration to have fireworks, entertainment and a thirty-piece brass band. However, it was never a good thing for the royal family to show excessive opulence, it didn't set a good example to the people. To address this issue, they would eat exactly the same as the people.

Entertainment was a new thing, something Java encouraged. Jugglers, acrobats, musicians, singers and clowns took their turns in entertaining the crowds before the big event.

Then the time arrived for the royal horn blowing – the signal for the dragons to commence their flying display.

The crowds and officials held their breath. The King's guard passed the special golden horn to Tegan. Hesitantly, she placed it on her lips and blew as hard as she could. The horn made an awful, ear-grating noise – this was normal. Nothing happened, not a single dragon stirred. She tried again just in case she hadn't blown the horn hard enough. It made the same awful noise, but still, nothing happened. Tegan was in tears. Apparently, she was not the new queen. It looked very much like it was going to be her sister who would be wearing the crown. Reluctantly, she passed the horn to Caron. Caron took a deep breath and blew as hard as she could into the dragon horn. Everyone held their breath again. Surely, this time the dragons would respond, but they didn't. She tried again, still no joy.

The people began to groan and some wept. The last thing anyone

wanted was another ice age, a shortage of food and no activity from the dragons. It didn't look good, this time there didn't appear to be a true and rightful heir to the throne.

Throughout the celebrations, Delyth kept an elaborately decorated case by her side. It was time for her to reveal its contents and interrupt the uneasy silence.

'Grandpa Java had a feeling this would happen so he commissioned the pipe maker to make a special device.'

Delyth unlocked the clasp and opened the case. Inside was a solid gold 'Y' shaped pipe device. She passed the device to Caron and Tegan. The top of the 'Y' had two mouthpieces and the bottom of the 'Y' fitted snuggly into the golden horn. This time, Caron and Tegan blew the horn together. With twice the puff, the noise was beyond excruciating, but it did the trick. Moments later, several dragons, in perfect formation passed over them and began their air display.

Java had realised a while back that if the girls were born at more or less the same time, (the consequence of caesarean birth) it would be a shared throne. This meant that together, they possessed all the magic of the kingdom, but individually they were apparently powerless.

Immediately the people realised what had happened. They were jubilant, overwhelmed and elated.

Now, they had two Queens to control the dragons and rule the kingdom.

From this day forth, it was known as…

The Kingdom of Queens

and certainly not…

The end

The story continues in: **A dragon named Delightful**

Other books by the Author:

A dragon named Delightful

(The continuation of this story)

The Queens, Tegan and Caron, have now settled in as rulers of the magical dragon Kingdom. Everything is perfect for a while, but one day, while the Queens are out for a morning run, an old evilness is disturbed. As a consequence, Queen Tegan becomes spiteful and tiresome with the Kingdom. She instructs Dragon Brathen, against her wishes, to take her home, back to the Netherworld. It is imperative that the rogue Queen and Brathen return, or the Kingdom will perish. There has to be a rescue mission.

The Residents of Wardate

Poppy Cock is a charismatic TV correspondent who suffers horrific burns from a callous incident while on an assignment.

Although the autonomous android, Madeline Bull, is truly groundbreaking, there are insurmountable problems. The solution: four brilliant scientists decide to interface Poppy Cock's disfigured body to their Madeline Bull android using the latest medical techniques and cutting-edge technology. The price for this convenient arrangement – Poppy must die and become Mad' Bull to fulfil her intended purpose, to exterminate The Residents of Wardate – a gathering of the world's most evil people.

Return to Wardate

(The second instalment of the Wardate saga)

Madeline Bull returns as the feisty android. This time Madeline faces her biggest challenges yet. The world is purposely charged with hatred and a new world war is on the horizon. Enter Madeline to thwart the dissenters and calm the world but there are far, far deeper concerns. For other reasons, the world is on the brink of obliteration, genocide is looming. Unknowingly Madeline has been modified and holds the key to save the world – if she really wants to.

Ward off strangers

(The final instalment of the Wardate saga)

The saga of The Residents of Wardate concludes with Madeline Bull, the feisty android, returning to a world where people are disappearing in their thousands. This time she has to accept that she has finally met her match and there is no way out. All she can do is save everyone else and try to put the world back in order. The reward for her ultimate sacrifice is… Hope.

The fruits of Bohemia

Sheridan Banner has a remarkable gift – a gift of perception to rival all who have preceded him. However, his unique abilities are perceived by others as little more than an irritation… until, one day, an abrupt stranger happens to call – the stranger's name is Mark Watson. His father has disappeared along with eighteen other people. Amongst these eighteen people is Sheridan's natural father… who he has never met.

Sheridan is unaware that he holds part of the key to finding them.

Again

Two perfect people, Caban and Keeva, saved from a doomed world, have a very important job to do. 300 million years later absolutely everything rests squarely on their shoulders. It may well involve unimaginable sacrifices and dangers beyond imagination but to refuse the request of an alien, who looks like Caban's father, is simply bad manners. Incidentally, Caban and Keeva are Adam and Eve.

The Author…

The author confesses that it has been a challenge, writing for young humans. Although he is vaguely aware that he used to be one, over the years, his pure, clean thoughts have become contaminated with life's seemingly perpetual vulgarity. In no way is this a justifiable excuse for the Author's somewhat crotchety behaviour but it's all you're going to get.

This is my last time as his biographer. For some reason, the Author is not happy with the way I've portrayed him over his previous four books. He claims I've completely omitted information about his life, career and preferences in favour of dwelling on his failing.

Let's just see if his next biographer does a better job, eh?